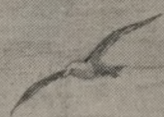
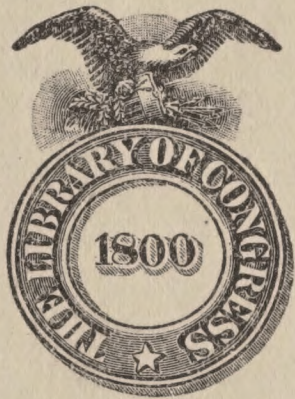


The Young
Wireless Operator
with the
Oyster Fleet



Frank M. Smith
Lewis E. Theiss.



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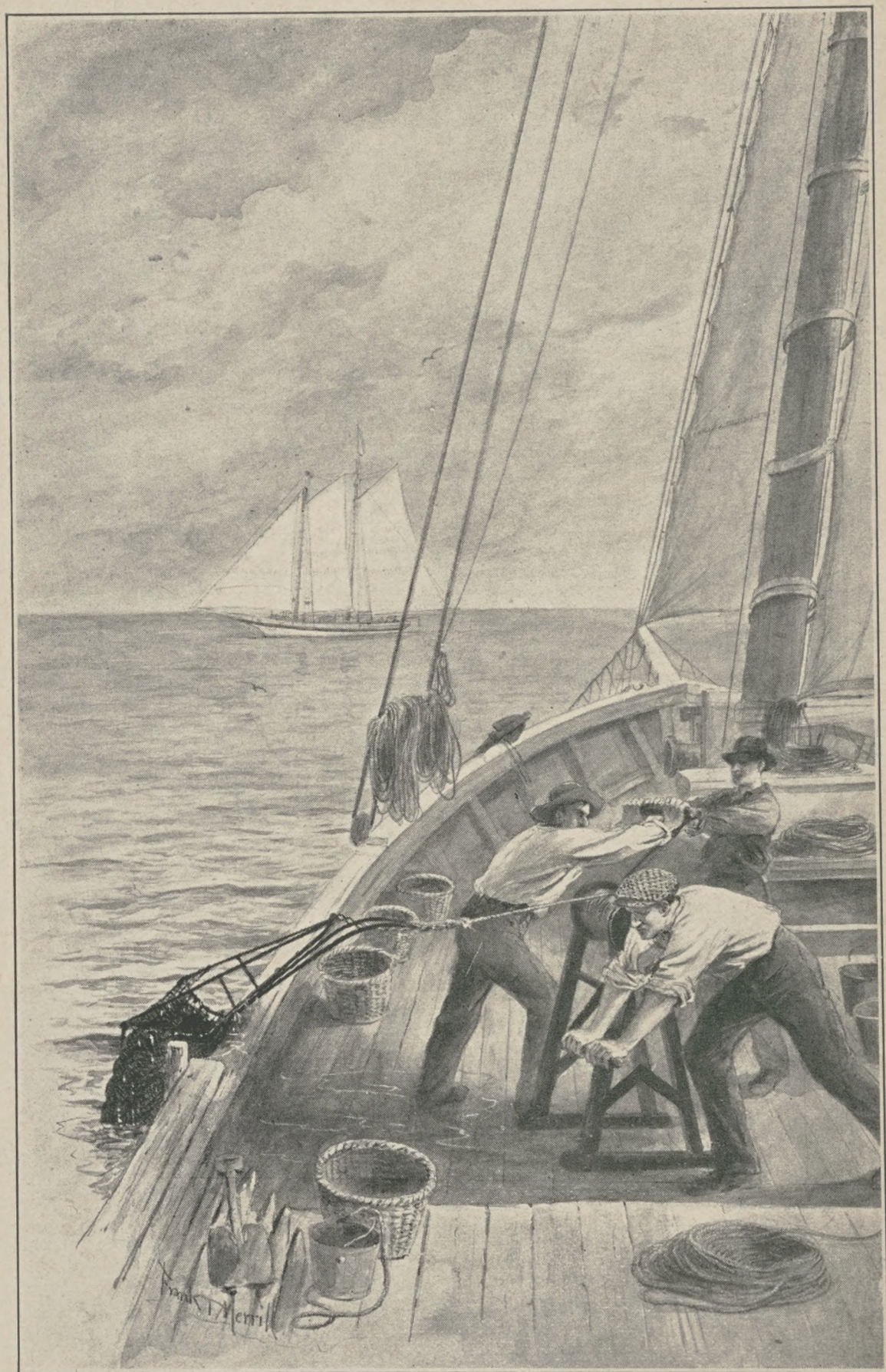
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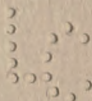


The Young Wireless Operator— With the Oyster Fleet

*HOW ALEC CUNNINGHAM WON HIS
WAY TO THE TOP IN THE
OYSTER BUSINESS*

By
LEWIS E. THEISS

ILLUSTRATED BY
FRANK T. MERRILL



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THE YOUNG WIRELESS OPERATOR—WITH THE OYSTER FLEET

22



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no 1

*This book is dedicated
to the late*

*DR. JULIUS NELSON,
sometime biologist for New Jersey,
and to*

*DR. THURLOW C. NELSON,
his son and successor, who have done and
are doing for the oyster industry, what
Liebig did for agricultural chemistry*

Foreword

THE story of America's wonderful beds of oysters is the same as the story of her matchless forests, her remarkable deposits of oil, her countless herds of bison, and her innumerable flocks of wild pigeons; and that story is completely told in one word of five letters—waste. When our magnificent Pennsylvania forests were cut, millions of feet of lumber were wantonly wasted, left to rot on the ground after the bark had been stripped off. When that unequaled pool of oil was discovered at Spindletop, gushers were allowed to spout for days and hours merely to gratify the vanity of purse-proud owners, and oil was wasted by the hundred thousand barrels. We are paying for such wastes to-day in the high price of lumber and oil. And our children and our children's children will go on paying the price.

I live on the banks of one of America's noblest rivers, the Susquehanna. A hundred years ago one could throw a line overboard and draw out fish without number. Now, one can fish half a day without getting a nibble. Some day, perhaps, we shall have fish again in the Susquehanna. But it will be in the same way that we are gradually re-foresting our denuded Pennsylvania mountains—at

enormous cost, which means perpetually high priced lumber. It will be the same with our oysters. The enormous beds, which, properly conserved, would have supplied the nation with cheap oysters for generations, are gone.

Most of us know less about oyster production than we do about lumbering or oil drilling. Yet oystering is one of the few truly picturesque occupations that survive in American life. This book, like its immediate predecessor, *The Young Wireless Operator—As a Fire Patrol*, is written in the hope that young readers may come to understand the real results of such wastes—the permanent imposition of unnecessary and burdensome costs for necessities of life which should be cheap.

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The Young Wireless Operator— With the Oyster Fleet

CHAPTER I

A FRIEND IN NEED

THE oyster-boat *Bertha B* lay off her pier at Bivalve, the great New Jersey oyster shipping centre. On either side of her were other craft of the oyster fleet, all packed together like cigars in a box, and all held fast to one another by stout hawsers, for the tide in the Maurice River was running out at a gallop, driven by a high northeast wind. Yet an observer could hardly have told whether one boat or a dozen lay off the pier, so dark was the November morning. Heavy clouds obscured the sky, hiding star and moon. Not the faintest sign of daybreak was yet visible in the east. A dense mist, that even in daylight would have made things appear uncertain and indistinct, drove before the high wind, chilling to the bone every one it touched.

For despite the early hour, the oystermen were astir. Lamps glowed in the snug cabins of the

oyster-boats. Here and there a lantern bobbed mysteriously in the dark. Red and green lights were being hoisted in the ships' riggings, and white lights fastened astern of many vessels. Harsh voices were heard calling through the night. The heavy tramp of boots on wooden decks sounded here and there in the darkness. Now and again there was a sharp splash as some sailor dropped a bucket into the tide for water, or a heavy hawser was cast off. On every side was heard the sound of preparation; for the fleet was about to sail for the oyster grounds.

Suddenly the door of the *Bertha B's* cabin opened. A great shaft of yellow light shot athwart the darkness. Two figures emerged from the cabin.

"Hello, Jim," called one of them. There was no answer. After a moment's pause the speaker called again. This time he raised his voice to a great bellow and repeated his cry: "Hello, Jim!" The second call, magnified by the fog, went roaring through the fleet. Still there was no answer. "He ain't here, Cap," said the man who had called, to the figure by his side. "Maybe he went ashore to get some tobacco."

"Tobacco nothing!" exclaimed the other angrily. "The skunk got his breakfast and then snuk ashore. I ain't surprised. He looked like that kind o' cattle. Though he did work pretty darned good the three weeks we had him!"

The speaker, Captain Christopher Bagley, paused an instant. Then, "Scabby trick!" he ex-

claimed. "Leaves us deucedly short handed, and he knowed it. Better go ashore, George, and see if you can find him. If you can't, get anybody you can pick up. We got to have another hand."

The sailor, George Bishop, turned without a word and made his way ashore, ducking under ropes and rigging, stumbling over chains and dredges, and stepping carefully from boat to boat, until at last he reached the ship at the end of the pier. The tide was near ebb, and the sailor had to climb into the ship's rigging in order to get on the pier.

The huge shed skirting the shore was dimly lighted by electric lights; and the illumination from these faintly lighted the pier, along which the sailor was now making his way. A great pile of burlap sacks was heaped up near the centre of the pier, and behind these, like a windbreak, stood a long row of barrels, piled one above another, and at least three tiers deep. But the sailor took no note of these things. His glance roved hither and thither through the great shed and on the various piers, looking for a familiar form. Half-way across the pier, he met a fellow sailor.

"Hello, Tom!" he called. "Seen anything of Jim Hawley?"

"No. Did he give you the slip?"

"That's what he did. He come aboard and et his breakfast and then snuk off. And we was short handed at that."

"I ain't surprised. He was drunk last night."

"Well, he won't do it again. Captain Bagley

won't stand for that kind of cattle. Don't know where we could get another hand, do you? We're awful short of men."

"No, I don't. Everybody around here that's willin' to work was snapped up long ago. I got to get aboard. I'm late myself. Good-bye."

The sailor hurried on down the pier and swung himself aboard the ship at its end.

Sailor Bishop turned on his heel and started along the pier again, to pursue his search for the missing deck-hand. But hardly had he taken a step before the pile of burlap bags stirred strangely. The top-most rose in air and a human figure crawled out from under them.

"Hello!" called this figure after the hurrying form of Sailor Bishop. "Do you want another hand? I'm looking for a job."

Sailor Bishop turned sharply and stared in astonishment at the person before him.

"Who are you? And where did you come from?" he demanded.

"My name's Alec Cunningham, and I come from Central City, in Pennsylvania."

"Ever been oystering?"

"No, sir. I never saw an oyster-boat before."

"Don't know whether you'll do or not," said the sailor. "But come aboard and talk to the captain. I'll be back in a minute. Wait for me here."

The sailor hurried away, to continue his quest for the missing Hawley. Alec Cunningham returned to the pile of burlap sacks and dug out an old, bat-

tered valise. Then he carefully piled the burlap sacks in order again, and when Sailor Bishop returned, he was standing near the end of the pier, stamping his feet and thrashing his arms about his sides, in an evident effort to get warm.

"Come on," said the sailor, and the two climbed cautiously from the pier to the ship's rigging and then dropped to her deck. Carefully they made their way across boat after boat, until at last they reached the *Bertha B*. Sailor Bishop led the way to the cabin and entered, followed by the stranger.

"I couldn't find Jim nowhere, Cap," explained the sailor, "but I picked up this fellow here. He ain't never ketched oysters, but maybe you could use him at that."

Captain Bagley stepped forward and looked critically at the stranger. He saw before him a tall, rangy lad of eighteen years, keen of face, with dark hair, strong nose, mouth, and chin, and with intelligence plainly stamped on his open, honest countenance.

"What's your name?" demanded the captain.

"Alec C-C-C-Cunningham, sir," replied the lad.

"Do you stutter always?"

"N-N-N-No, sir. I don't stutter at all. I'm just a little ch-ch-ch-chilly." And the lad shivered violently.

"He was sleeping on the pier in a pile of oyster sacks," said Sailor Bishop in explanation.

Captain Bagley stepped forward and laid his hand on young Cunningham's wrist. It was like

ice. The captain ran a quick, investigating finger over the lad's shoulder. "Hell!" he exclaimed. "The kid ain't got nothin' on."

He turned to the cook who was just cleaning up the breakfast dishes. "Dick," he said, "give this boy some grub and a bowl of coffee, and make it hot, too."

Again he turned to the lad before him. "Get over beside the stove," he said. "Why in the deuce didn't you tell a fellow you were freezing to death? Sleep out in a pile of oyster sacks! Why didn't you tell a fellow you had no place to sleep? You could have had a bunk on the *Bertha B.*"

Alec Cunningham tried to express his gratitude, but the right words were hard to find.

"I—I—I'm much obliged to you," he said. "I didn't get here till late last night and I didn't know anybody, and I didn't want to disturb strangers. But it *was* cold."

"Didn't get here till late last night," repeated the captain. "Where do you come from, and what did you come here for, if you don't know anything about oystering and don't know anybody here?"

"I thought maybe I could find my uncle," replied Alec.

"Then you do know somebody here," said the captain sharply, and again he looked searchingly at the lad before him.

"No, sir, I don't," replied Alec. "You see, sir, my father died recently. My mother has been dead since I was a little baby. I have no one to live

with. So I thought I would look up my uncle. My father used to tell me about him, but I never saw him. He is an oysterman here at Bivalve."

"What's his name?"

"Thomas Robinson, sir. He was my mother's brother."

Captain Bagley turned square around. "Now don't that beat the deuce," he said to himself. After a moment he turned about and faced Alec again.

"My lad," he said in a strangely altered voice, "you just put your things in that bunk. The *Bertha B* is your home as long as you want to stay on her and work—that is, it is if you don't play us any scabby tricks like that scoundrel who left us in the lurch this morning."

"But you know I don't know anything about the oyster business," said Alec with hesitation.

"Neither does anybody else when he's born," growled the captain. "We all had to learn. And unless I can't read faces any longer, you can learn as good as anybody."

"Then you'll take me as a hand?"

"You're engaged already."

"Oh, sir! I don't know how to thank you. I—I—I was awfully in need of work. I haven't a cent left. I don't know what I would have done if I hadn't found work pretty soon. You won't be sorry you hired me."

An idea struck the captain. "When did you eat last?" he demanded suddenly.

"Yesterday morning, sir," replied the lad.

"Dick, you darned good-for-nothing cook," stormed the captain, "what are you standing around looking at the kid for? Get busy, or I'll fire you."

The cook merely smiled. The captain went blustering off to the wheel-house. Alec looked puzzled, almost alarmed. In perplexity he turned to the cook.

"What about my uncle?" he inquired. "Won't the captain let me try to find him? What did I do to make the captain angry?"

"Lad," said the cook kindly, "there ain't no use trying to find your uncle. He went overboard last spring, when they was h'isting an anchor on the *Mary Ford* and the anchor purchase parted. We never seen him again. He was a buddy of the captain's. If you just behave yourself, you've got a job with Captain Bagley for life. Now, get busy and eat your breakfast, for we're going to cast off in a few minutes."

Alec picked up the steaming bowl of coffee that the cook had placed before him and was about to take a swallow from it when a crashing sound rent the air and the *Bertha B* swayed violently at her moorings. The captain stepped from the wheel-house and ran out on deck. The sound of angry voices arose. A moment later Captain Bagley came back.

"That old fool, Tom Hardy, has fouled us," he said angrily. "He had too much sail up. But he'll pay for his foolishness. His bowsprit carried

away. I don't know how we're going to get out of here now. The tide's jammed him fast! Anyway, you'll have plenty of time to eat, lad. So go to it. Now mind you fill him up, Dick."

CHAPTER II

THE FLEET SETS SAIL

“**C**OME over here to the table and set down,” said the cook, with a kindly smile. So tiny was the cabin that one step took Alec to the proffered stool. Ravenously hungry though he was, his surroundings were so new and interesting that for a moment he almost forgot to eat, as he looked around the cabin.

Tiny it was, indeed. And yet everything in it was so compactly arranged that half a dozen men could live in it. In one corner stood a small, square stove, now delightfully hot, with its top guarded by a slender iron railing, like a miniature fence. Alec knew at once that this was to keep the pots and pans from sliding off the stove when the ship was pitching about. Even the dishes were suggestive of rough weather; for the cook had given Alec his coffee in a big bowl, and the huge plate which he was filling up with pork-chops, fried eggs, and steaming fried potatoes, was nothing but a great soup plate. Beside the stove stood a little cupboard, and this, with the stove, practically filled the stern end of the cabin. A coal-oil lamp was fastened to the wall between stove and cupboard.

There was just room enough left in this part of the cabin for the men to pack themselves around the table. The table, however, occupied less space than any table Alec had ever heard of, for it was nothing but two smooth, unpainted boards, perhaps four feet long, and hinged so as to fold together lengthwise. One end of this table now rested in a frame on the port side of the cabin, while the other end was slung from the cabin roof by a rope.

Alec thought he had never tasted anything so good as the pork-chops and fried eggs. Before he knew it, the cook was filling up his plate again, and pouring him a second bowl of coffee. Alec dumped some sugar in it and poured out a generous supply of condensed milk from the tin can the cook shoved toward him.

Now he noticed that the little cabin had a window and a door on each side. The stove and the cupboard occupied the stern end of the cabin. The forward end of the cabin contained bunks, built one above another, along the sides, where several men could sleep. The forward end of the cabin had been converted into a little pilot-house, with glass windows along its entire front and a door at each side, where the captain operated the boat.

For, like most of the oyster craft, the *Bertha B* had been changed from sailing ship to power boat. The four-cylindered gasoline engine that drove the ship and operated the oyster-dredges stood immediately below the cabin bunk room. Alec could see the engine, for a little hatchway in the floor of the

cabin led directly to the engine room. The hatch was open and Alec could see a man oiling and adjusting the engine, preparatory to getting under way.

When Alec had eaten his fill, the cook began to wash the dishes. Alec picked up a dish towel and dried them. The cook seemed surprised and pleased. Alec stacked the dishes away in a tiny cupboard behind the bunks, at the cook's direction, while the cook folded up the table and stowed it in a rack overhead, leaving the tiny cabin clear and orderly.

"Thanks," smiled Dick, when they had finished; and the way the cook spoke made Alec feel that he had won a friend.

"If a little thing like drying the dishes will win friends for a fellow," said Alec to himself, "I'll wipe them every time I get a chance. I never realized until the last few weeks how much friends mean to a fellow."

To the cook he said, "Will it be all right for me to go on deck?"

"Sure," said the cook. "But put this on." And from a bunk he pulled a heavy reefing-jacket.

Gratefully Alec pulled on the coat and stepped out on deck. By this time the eastern sky was aglow. The fog-bank had dissipated. The sun was not yet up, but there was sufficient light for Alec to see.

The first thing to catch his attention was the ship that had fouled the *Bertha B* and the boats along-

side of her. These craft, as close together as the fingers of one's hand, lay with their noses pointing up-stream. Across the bows of the outermost was jammed the offending vessel, the rushing ebb-tide holding her fast. The end of her bowsprit dangled helplessly and a broken jib-stay was waving about in the wind. Jammed tight in her rigging was the bowsprit of one of the ships she had fouled, holding her tight, like an apple spitted on a stick. But no damage had been done excepting to the offending vessel herself. Men were pushing against the ship with boat-hooks, while Captain Hardy's own crew were pumping at a capstan from which a hawser, stretched tight as a fiddle string, ran to an up-stream pier.

The master of the boat was an evil-looking fellow, as burly as he was hard-featured. In a great, roaring voice he was cursing his crew, blaming them for the mishap he was responsible for himself. With angry impatience Captain Bagley watched the efforts that were making to free the boat.

"The old fool," he muttered, and to Alec he said, "That fellow ought to be doing time at Trenton. He's always up to something crooked. The last time they caught him, he was dredging illegally in the natural beds. He got off with a fine, but I reckon the next time he gets caught in any crooked business, he'll go to prison."

For a few moments Alec watched the sailors pumping at the capstan. Then his gaze shifted to other interesting sights about him.

Down-stream and up, rose a forest of masts; for the pier off which the *Bertha B* now lay was only one of a score or more parallel piers. And off each pier were moored six or eight vessels, with still other ships at greater distances, tied along the shore beyond the great pier shed. There were scores and scores of boats, mostly two-masted schooners. Across the river, which was perhaps 1,000 feet wide, was a second great pier shed that extended along the shore for hundreds of feet, also with piers running out from it into the river every few rods. And here, and along the shore above and below the piers, were anchored other scores of boats. Altogether, the oyster fleet numbered some hundreds of vessels.

On every ship were signs of activity. In every rigging red and green lights already sparkled, or men were about to hoist them. On some ships white lights glimmered aloft; while more and more boats were showing white lights at their sterns.

Fascinated, Alec watched the scene. For ship after ship, on either side of the river, now cast off her lines, swung gracefully with the current and headed down-stream. On every hand rose the steady put-put-put of ships' motors. For although most of the oyster craft still carried sails, practically all of them were driven by gasoline, their sails being used merely as auxiliaries to their engines, or to steady them when dredging in a wind.

And now Alec saw something that made his eyes fairly pop open with astonishment. Down-stream

came a shapely schooner, sails set and bellying in the wind. But it was neither wind nor tide that drove her so fast. For behind her, immediately below her white stern light, was a chugging motor-boat, nose hard against the schooner, pushing her along at a merry pace. Alec could hardly trust his eyes. For the little motor-boat was fastened with its nose high in air and its stern deep in the tide, and had not a soul aboard of her. But above her, at the wheel on the stern of the schooner, stood a silent steersman. While Alec was debating with himself as to whether he should believe what he saw or not, a second oyster-boat came slipping by, also driven by a little power boat astern. Before he reached the oyster-beds, Alec saw dozens of boats so operated; and the cook told him that when the oyster-boats changed from sail power to motors, some ships, like the *Bertha B*, had had engines installed in their holds, while others were driven instead by small power boats.

Presently the ship across their bow was pulled loose, freeing the little fleet. The outer vessel immediately cast loose, swung in the tide, and headed down the river. Meantime, a bell rang, there was a sudden chug-chug-chug alongside, the clank of machinery was heard below, and the *Bertha B* began to vibrate. The captain was warming up his motor.

Then, "Cast off!" came the order from the pilot-house. The hawsers were hauled aboard. The *Bertha B* moved forward, described a great arc in the river, and headed for the sea.

Wonderful was the sight that now greeted Alec's eyes. Like a flock of closely herded sheep, the oyster-boats were making for the dredging grounds. Before him, beside him, and behind him, their sails showing faintly in the dim light, Alec saw scores of moving ships. Now he understood the purpose of all the lights he had seen hoisted. Ahead of him dozens of stern lights shone white, showing exactly where each ship was riding. And astern, red and green lights flashed their guiding signals.

As the light grew stronger, the scenes around the *Bertha B* stood out more and more distinctly. Accustomed as Alec was to mountains and limited views, the pictures that now unfolded before his eyes were like visions of a new world. The view was boundless. At least, it stretched level to the distant horizon in every direction. East, west, north, south, look where he would, the land was as level as a floor. The river wound about like a snake, and after the *Bertha B* had traversed one or two of these serpentine reaches, she seemed to be in the centre of a vast marsh-land. Everywhere stretched limitless areas of salt meadow. Cattails, tall rushes, reeds, salt hay, sedges, and other marshy growths, standing dead and sere, painted the marshes a monotonous brown. The slightest thing that rose above the general level seemed magnified into a great bulk. Here and there distant stacks of salt hay stood up against the sky-line; but they seemed huge, gigantic, unlike any haystacks Alec had ever seen. And here and there, also, stood

solitary trees or groups of trees, seemingly thrusting their heads into the very clouds.

But ever the young oysterman's roving eye came back to the moving fleet. Two, three, and sometimes even four abreast, trailing close on one another's heels, the white oyster-boats moved out to sea in majesty. Overhead sailed innumerable gulls, watching for the scraps thrown from nautical breakfast tables. And when some cook stepped to his deck and dumped his table scrapings overboard, gulls came darting from far and near and settled down to fight and cry over the spoils.

Suddenly Alec heard the captain's voice. "Come in here, youngster. I want to talk with you."

Alec made his way through the cabin into the pilot-house, which was just deep enough to allow a person to stand comfortably or to sit on a stool. The floor of the pilot-house was considerably higher than the deck level, and Alec could see much better here. Also, it was warm. And although he had been so fascinated by the scene that he had momentarily forgotten about the weather, he now realized that he had been cold out on the deck.

A flash of light caught his eye. Then another light blinked at a much greater distance. "What are those lights?" Alec asked the captain.

"Those are the range-lights, to show the way into the harbor. And off there you can see East Point Light."

Alec followed the pointing finger of the captain and saw, off the port bow, a third light gleaming.

"We seem to be catching those fellows ahead," commented Alec.

"I reckon they're stuck in the mud," said the captain. "This northeast wind's been blowing hard for eighteen hours. It will make pretty low water."

"How much water does the *Bertha B* draw?" inquired Alec.

"Four or five feet," said the captain.

"Then we ought not to have any trouble," said Alec. "It looks as though this river was pretty deep."

"Oh! There's plenty of water in the river; but there's a bar across the mouth of it, and with this wind blowing there won't be much water over it."

Rapidly the *Bertha B* drew near the boats ahead of her. "They're all fast," commented the captain, as they passed a schooner on which a sailor was sounding with a pole. "Don't believe he's got three feet of water," the captain added. "And look there! The bar's clear out of water, with a flock of gulls on it. That's a sight you don't often see—the bar out of water."

Alec looked where the captain was pointing, and there, a long distance off the port bow, where the river entered the Delaware Bay, was a distinct black streak in the water, roughened at one end. The rough spots were gulls. But Alec would never have known that the black streak was a strip of mud and the knobby end was a mass of birds, had not the captain told him.

"Are we going to get through?" asked Alec, for the *Bertha B* was still slowly forging ahead.

"I don't know," said the captain. "We're in the mud now, but we've got a good engine and if we can keep in the channel, maybe we can make it. But she's hard to steer in the mud and most of those boats are right in the channel."

Slowly the *Bertha B* continued to move through the mud. A short distance ahead of her a schooner lay directly in the path. The captain turned his wheel and tried to swing the *Bertha B* to one side, but she would not turn. Nearer she came and still nearer to the stranded schooner. But the captain could not turn her. A collision seemed inevitable.

"Let go that starboard dredge," cried the captain to Sailor Bishop, who was still on deck. At the same instant the captain signalled sharply to the engineer. For a single moment the propeller ceased to turn. Then the *Bertha B* trembled from end to end, as the engine started again, full speed astern. The effect was instantaneous. The *Bertha B* almost stopped in her tracks. Before ever the sailor could reach the dredge and heave it overboard, the oyster-boat swung slightly to one side and lay still.

"Never mind that dredge," called the captain. To Alec he said, "We're done. All we can do is to lay here and wait for the tide to float us."

CHAPTER III

OVER THE BAR

THE *Bertha B* now lay as motionless as “a painted ship upon a painted ocean.” The captain released his hold of the steering-wheel and turned toward Alec, studying his face again.

“How old are you?” he asked.

“I’ll be nineteen on my next birthday.”

“You are pretty big for your age.”

“I’m five feet, ten inches,” laughed Alec, “and I don’t believe I’m done growing yet.”

“No. You’ll be a six footer before you’re done. Was your father a large man?”

“No, sir. I am already two inches taller than he was.”

“Where do you get your size from? Was your mother large?”

“No, sir. I’ve seen pictures of my mother, and she wasn’t as tall as Dad. I guess it must come from good food and exercise.”

“If that’s the case, you ought to keep right on growing. You’ll get plenty of both aboard an oyster-boat.”

“If the breakfast I had was a fair sample, I’m sure there will be plenty of food.”

"I'll see that you get plenty of exercise, too," smiled the captain.

Again he looked Alec over, seemingly in appraisal of his physical powers. "You don't look like a working boy," he said. "What kind of exercise have you been used to?"

"I never had to work for my living," replied Alec, "because I was going to school and Dad supported me. But I did all the chores at home—chopped the wood, took care of the ashes, dug the garden, and so on. And I was on the high school athletic teams."

"Humph!" snorted the captain. "That's hard work, that is—playing a little baseball."

Alec flushed slightly, but made no reply. He knew well enough that the captain had never played a hard game of football or he would not have made that remark.

"Know anything about water or boats?" the captain asked, after an interval.

"I've been used to little sailboats and canoes all my life, sir, and I can swim."

Alec might have added that he was the champion swimmer of the Central City High School, but he wisely did not.

"Well," rejoined the captain, "that may be useful to you. There are too many sailors who cannot swim."

"Sailors who cannot swim," repeated Alec in astonishment. "Why, I supposed all sailors could swim."

"Then you supposed wrong. Lots of 'em can't swim a stroke."

The captain thrust his head out of a window and surveyed the water. "Tide's about run out," he said.

Alec noticed that the water below them was moving much slower than it had been. Accustomed as he was to an inland stream, in which the current always ran one way, the alternating flow of this tide-water stream interested him deeply. As he looked at the banks of the river, he could see that the water had fallen several feet.

"How much does the tide fall here?" he asked.

"About six feet, I reckon," said the captain, "but this is an unusually low tide. In fact, we haven't had a tide as low as this in years. I don't know when I've seen that bar out of water before. This stiff northeast wind, coming straight down the river, has blown the water all out into the Bay."

"Has the river fallen as much back at the pier as it has here?" asked Alec, examining the shore carefully.

"Sure thing. There's enough water to float a boat off the ends of the piers, but the slips between 'em, where you saw the scows, haven't an inch of water in 'em. They're only mud-flats, now."

In the darkness Alec hadn't seen much of the scows, but he did not tell the captain so. Instead, he said, "It's wonderful. Will it all run back now?"

"You'll see it start to flow back in a few minutes.

Of course this won't be a very high tide, for the wind that blew the water out of the river will keep some of it from running back."

"Suppose the wind were blowing in exactly the opposite direction," said Alec. "Would it blow the river full of water?"

"That's exactly what it would do. When that happens the water sometimes gets up over the pier you slept on. That's a couple of feet higher than common."

"Whew!" whistled Alec. "That's like our spring-floods inland. Everything gets covered with water."

"Pretty much the same thing," said the captain. "But we'd a good deal rather have a high tide than one of your floods. High tides don't do so much damage as your floods. And then the tides help us a great deal. But they was more useful before the days of power boats than they are now. In them days, if there wasn't any wind to blow your boat, all you had to do was to wait for the tide to change, and you could go up-stream or down without a bit of wind. But now that we use gasoline, we don't pay much attention to the tide."

Alec glanced out of the window again. The chips and bubbles that had been floating downstream were now moving ever so slightly in the opposite direction.

"Look!" he cried. "The tide's running in."

"Sure," said the captain. "I've been watching it. We'll be off pretty soon."

Again the captain leaned out of his window and looked up-stream and down. "Every last boat in the fleet is hung up," he said. "Never knowed that to happen before. Some of 'em always gets through." He closed the window and once more faced Alec. "What was you studying in school?" he asked.

"I took the usual required work in high school," said Alec, "but I was specializing in biology."

"What's that?"

"The study of life processes," replied Alec.

The captain looked blank. "What do you do in that study?" he asked.

"Why, you try to find out all about the life of an animal, how it is born and how it grows and eats and multiplies. You dissect animals, and you examine them under a microscope. In short, you try to find out all about an animal's life, just as you oystermen probably do with oysters."

"Humph!" snorted the captain. Then he laughed aloud. "Now ain't that an idea," he exclaimed, "watching oysters under a microscope! Young fellow, we ketch oysters, that's what we do. We ketch 'em for people to eat."

"But I'm sure it would help you to study them, too. A man can't know too much about the things he handles."

"If that's the kind of nonsense they teach you at high school, I'm glad I never went to one. I can read and write, and that's enough learnin' for any oysterman."

Alec made no reply, but the captain's remark had set him thinking. He wondered if there were not an opportunity to apply his school training in the oyster business. He knew that science had almost revolutionized farming, and he wondered if the oyster business might not be somewhat like farming was before the days of the agricultural colleges. But he did not know, and he very wisely kept quiet. He determined that he would look into the matter as he had opportunity.

He was silent so long that the captain suddenly remarked, "Never mind what I said, lad. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings."

"You didn't hurt my feelings," smiled Alec. "You just set me to thinking."

"Tell me more about your life at Central City," the captain went on.

"Well, there isn't much to tell. My father worked for the electric light company, and I belonged to the Camp Brady Wireless Patrol. But that probably wouldn't interest you, any."

"You mean that you know something about wireless telegraphy?"

"Sure. I've got a little outfit with me in my valise. It isn't much of an outfit, though, for I made it myself. But I can send and receive over a pretty good radius, even if it is home-made."

The captain looked at Alec with evident admiration. "Do you mean you made the set yourself?"

"Absolutely. I can install it here on the *Bertha B* and take messages for you, if you'll let me."

"It's a nice thing, wireless is," replied the captain, "but it wouldn't be any use on an oyster-boat. Besides, it would be in the way. You see how cramped we are for room. These boats was all right as long as they stuck to sails, but they filled up the hold with engines and winders and a lot of machinery when they turned 'em into power boats, and they ain't big enough any longer. We can ketch twice as many oysters with power boats as we used to with sails, and we don't have room to carry 'em when we get a big catch. Some day they'll build oyster-boats of a new sort. They'll make 'em bigger and higher and have room in the hold where we can put oysters. Then we can catch 'em all winter."

"Don't you catch them in winter now?" asked Alec in astonishment, for he distinctly recalled eating oysters all through the winter season.

"We have to carry 'em on deck," explained Captain Bagley, "and in cold weather they freeze. Then we have to stop dredging. Your winter oysters come from the Chesapeake, I reckon; at least in real cold weather. But tell me some more about this Wireless Patrol. What was it?"

"Oh! Just a bunch of us fellows who had wireless outfits. We used to talk to each other at night and listen in to all the news that's flying about; and we used to go camping, too. When the war came, we knew enough about wireless to be of some use. We caught the German dynamiters at Elk City, and four of our boys helped the Secret Service in

New York run down the secret wireless of the Germans. One of our boys, Henry Harper, is a government wireless man now, and Roy Mercer is wireless man on the steamer *Lycoming* running between New York and Galveston. Charley Russell is a forest ranger back home in the state forest, and he got his job largely because of his ability with the wireless. They're going to install a wireless system in his section of the forest, it is so useful in fighting forest fires."

"You don't say!"

"Sure. You see, Charley started as a fire patrol and he saved a tract of the finest timber in Pennsylvania because he was able to call help promptly with his wireless. He'd have had to hike twenty-four miles over the mountains and back to get help if he hadn't had his wireless outfit with him, and the fire would have got such a start it would have burned up the whole tract before they could have stopped it. Oh! You can do most anything with wireless. I'm sorry I can't use my outfit aboard the *Bertha B*. I could string up my aerial between the masts, and I don't believe my wires would be one bit in your way."

The captain smiled indulgently. "Wireless is all right, I know," he said. "But we ain't got any use for it on an oyster-boat. Our business is to ketch oysters."

"Don't you ever have accidents?" inquired Alec. "With so many ships sailing in the same place, I should think you would have collisions every day."

Why, I should think the oystermen would almost come to blows, like those gulls there fighting for table scraps."

"I don't quite get you," said the captain. "Why should we fight?"

"To see who shall get the oysters, of course. Suppose that ship over there wanted to dredge in exactly the same spot you have in mind. How are you going to prevent her from doing it? And where will you get your oysters then?"

"Well, you are a landlubber, for sure," laughed the captain. "Why, no other oysterman would dare come on my grounds. I'd send him to jail, if he did."

"What!" cried Alec. "You don't mean that you own part of the oyster-bed? I supposed the government owned all navigable waters. Our Susquehanna River is a public stream."

"Right you be, lad. The government does own the Delaware Bay, but it leases the oyster-beds, or at least land for oyster-beds, to private individuals. Each oysterman has his own grounds, just as each of your Pennsylvania farmers has his own farm."

"Are you kidding me?" asked Alec, mindful of the reputation sailors have for spinning yarns.

"Not a bit," replied the captain. "I thought everybody knew that."

"But how could a man have an oyster-bed separate from all the other beds in a big body of water like the Delaware Bay? Why, it must be miles and

miles in width. How could anybody tell just where his oysters were, in such a vast expanse of water?"

"How could he tell?" snorted the captain. "How can a farmer tell where his farm is, with so much land all around it?"

"Why, he'd fence it in, of course, or mark the boundary lines in some way."

"Well, young fellow, oystermen have just as much brains as farmers. And they are just as particular to fence in their own grounds, too."

Alec's face was blank for a moment. Then he smiled broadly. "Now you *are* kidding me," he said.

"Not for a minute," said the captain. "Do you see that boat over there—the *Mary and Hattie*?"

"Sure!"

"Do you see those long poles she carries over her starboard rail, near the stern? They're long saplings with all the branches trimmed off but the top ones."

"I see them," said Alec.

"Well, those are the kind of markers we use to stake off an oyster-bed. You see there are natural beds in the Bay, where the state won't allow any dredging except to ketch seed-oysters for spring planting. But an oysterman can lease as much land elsewhere as he wants and plant it with oysters. The state surveys it and then the oysterman marks it off with those poles. And if anybody but the owner dredges oysters in that ground he'll get just what a fellow would get if he went into a farmer's

field and stole his crops. The oysterman owns every oyster in his bed."

"Honestly?" asked Alec, who was so much astonished that he forgot his manners. "Why, I supposed that the oysters grew anywhere on the bottom and that the oystermen just dredged wherever they felt like dredging."

"Humph!" said the captain. "There'd be a lot of oysters left in a few years if we did that. The beds would be dredged clean. That's the way they used to ketch oysters, and the state had to put a stop to it in order to save any oysters at all. Why, the whole Atlantic coast used to be covered with oysters, and now there's only a few beds left. This bed in the Maurice River Cove is one of the most valuable in the whole United States. But it wouldn't last long if the state didn't regulate oystering."

"How does the state regulate it?" asked Alec.

"Well, there's the natural bed I told you about. That lies above what we call the Southwest Line. Nobody dare dredge above that line except in May and June to ketch seed-oysters. That gives the oysters in the natural bed a chance to multiply from year to year, so as to provide the necessary seed."

"But what's to prevent a boat from slipping in there and dredging oysters on the sly? If the boats are scattered all over the Bay, and each boat is busy dredging on its own ground, I don't see what's to hinder a dishonest captain from stealing the state's oysters."

Captain Bagley lowered a window-sash and craned his neck, so he could look up-stream. "See that long, low power boat up there?" he asked, after running his eye over the fleet behind him. "That's one of the guard-boats. The state has four of 'em. They're fast little craft and they watch the fleet every minute. I think that's the *Dianthus*. She knows just where every boat belongs, and if a fellow dredges on state land or on some other fellow's ground, she'll nab him quick."

"Why, that's just like a police force," said Alec.

"That's exactly what it is. You see this oyster business has grown to be a big thing. We shipped nine million dollars' worth of oysters out of Bivalve last year, and the state ain't takin' no chances on having that business wrecked. So the state keeps pretty close watch on us."

"Don't it make you kind of nervous, to be watched all the time?" asked Alec.

"Lord bless you!" said the captain. "We ain't got no reason to be nervous. We'd rather have that guard-boat there than not. It protects our property when we're not around. Most of the oystermen in this fleet is as honest as the day is long. They wouldn't touch another man's grounds if you'd pay 'em. But we do have a few crooked ones, like any other business, and they have to be watched. The guard-boats don't pay much attention to the rest of us, but they keep pretty close tab on skippers that are known to be dishonest. Hello! The *Dianthus* is moving. We'll see what we can do."

The captain leaned forward and rang his bell. The motor began to turn and the ship once more vibrated. Slowly the *Bertha B* moved ahead. The captain swung her toward the channel. Around her the water was inky black, where her propeller was churning up the mud. The water deepened and the vessel gained headway. In a moment she was going smoothly. The bar ahead had disappeared. The tide was rising rapidly. All about her, other ships were starting or trying to start. Those with power forged slowly ahead through the mud until they reached the centre of the channel. A few that depended upon their sails alone were forced by the wind to circle about before they could head toward the oyster grounds. Everywhere the scene was one of animation. Ahead of the *Bertha B* and behind her, ships by the score were once more in motion. The water sparkled in the light of the rising sun. And as the river widened into the Bay, the water began to roll and billow under the strong sweep of the rising wind.

On went the *Bertha B*. To her left stretched East Point, a long, low finger of sand, reaching far out into the water, the square, white lighthouse, surmounted by its round light tower, bulking huge against the horizon. On the right stretched limitless reaches of brown marsh-land. Behind her ran the serpentine river. And before her lay the Bay, a waste of tossing water. As far as Alec could see, nothing else was visible. It was his first sight

of salt water, and he stood entranced, fascinated by the picture of the tumbling waves, the darting gulls, and the fair white ships, heading out to the oyster grounds, like sheep on the way to pasture.

CHAPTER IV

DREDGING OYSTERS

SUDDENLY Sailor Bishop appeared on deck. He drew off the cover of the forward hatch and dropped into the hold. Then broad-bladed oyster shovels, oyster baskets, culling hammers, and other implements were shoved up through the hatchway.

“I can help him with that,” said Alec, and leaving the pilot-house, he made his way forward. But the sailor was already out of the hold and replacing the hatch cover. He grinned at Alec’s offer of assistance and said there was nothing to be done. Nor was there much to do. The necessary shovels and baskets were placed amidship, where they could be reached easily by the men at the dredges. Then the two stood side by side on the deck, looking at the animated scene. The wind still blew fresh and the air was cold. But with the warm coat outside of him and a good breakfast inside, Alec was not the least bit chilled. The fresh air was invigorating.

The members of the Wireless Patrol had always been told to keep their eyes and ears open and their mouths closed; and Alec now tried to practice what he had been taught. The oyster-dredges interested

him keenly. These were huge iron frames, shaped like wish-bones, with ends that curved over like hooks, and that were connected by a straight iron bar. This bar was armed with huge iron teeth, like those of a rake. This toothed bar was intended to drag along the bottom and rake up the oysters, as pebbles are raked together with a garden rake. The oysters so caught were held in a bag or network, made of iron rings and links, that was fastened to the frame of the dredge.

On either side of the ship lay one of these dredges, ready to be put overboard. Immediately before each dredge, and mounted in the ship's rail, was a horizontal iron roller, and just back of this was a vertical roller. It was perfectly evident that the horizontal roller was intended for use in pulling the dredge in and out of the ship, while the vertical roller would revolve under pressure of the dredge chain as this paid out after the dredge was tossed overboard. The chain, in each case, was fastened to the apex of the dredge, or what might be called the top of the wish-bone; and these chains, one from each side, led directly to the winders amidships, which were simply revolving drums or spools of iron that wound up the dredge chains.

Alec was more than eager to see the outfit work, but the ship went on and on at full speed.

"How far do we have to go before we begin to dredge?" he finally asked his companion.

"I reckon our grounds are about eight miles out," replied the sailor.

Alec opened his eyes wide, but said nothing. By this time they were far offshore. They could still see the trees and haystacks on the meadows but the shore-line was becoming more and more indistinct. The oyster-boats had scattered in every direction, and now that the ships had separated there did not seem to be nearly as many of them.

"There's Egg Island Light," said the sailor, pointing ahead to starboard.

Alec looked, and finally made out what seemed to him a tiny, dark column in the gray waves. With every minute the expanse of water widened and the shore grew more indistinct. Suddenly Alec's attention was attracted by something far ahead in the water. He saw at once that it was a little cluster of saplings, such as he had seen lashed to the side of the *Mary and Hattie*. Their bushy tops gave them the appearance of a tiny thicket growing right in the water. Then he saw a second cluster of stakes, and beyond them, at intervals, other stakes. All these little groups of stakes were in a straight line, so that the effect was, indeed, not unlike a long fence-row. As the *Bertha B* drew nearer to the oyster-beds, Alec could see stakes in every direction. Most of them, he noticed, were just bare poles, that stuck out of water two or three feet, like the tips of so many fishing poles. But some groups of stakes were still bushy at the top, like the first clusters he had seen. He asked his companion why two sorts of stakes were used.

"They was all alike when they was put down,"

said Sailor Bishop, "but most of them have lost their tops. The waves and the ice and the oyster-boats themselves break off the little branches at the tops, leaving only the bare poles."

"Then why aren't all the tops broken and not just some?"

"Oh! Those bushy ones have just been put down. You see the oystermen like to mark their beds well in the fall. It makes it so much easier to find their grounds when spring comes."

"What do you mean?"

"Why, if this happens to be a cold winter, every pole in sight may be broke off by the ice. If a skipper has put down fresh poles just before winter, he can find his bed pretty easy when spring comes."

"How?" asked Alec in amazement. "How can he ever tell where his grounds are if his stakes are gone?"

"Well, they won't be gone altogether. Just the tops are broke off. At low tide there'll be some stumps sticking up. A skipper just sails out and gets the range of his beds and then hunts for his stakes till he finds them. Then he puts down new stakes."

"But how can he ever get his range, as you call it?"

"Oh! He knows his landmarks. You see Egg Island Light over there, and just behind it that tall clump of trees? Well, if we had an oyster-bed right here, that light and those trees would always be in a line when we are over our bed. Now if he

had some landmarks in this other direction, too, a skipper could always tell when he was right on this spot, for he'd have to have both sets of landmarks in line."

"Why, that's nothing but triangulation," said Alec. "We studied that in school."

"I don't know what they call it in school, but that's the way a skipper finds an oyster-bed when his stakes is gone."

"What I don't understand," questioned Alec, "is why the ice doesn't take the stakes away altogether, instead of just breaking off the branches at the tops of the stakes."

"Lord bless you, son! You couldn't pull them stakes up with a derrick."

"Why not?"

"Because they're down in the mud five or six feet and it holds them tighter'n a porous plaster sticks to your back."

"How do you ever get them down so deep?"

"Oh! They go down easy as a rule. You just take a stake under your arm and work it down into the mud. It goes down easy enough, but it won't come out for nothing. Sometimes, though, when the mud's tough or the bottom sandy, they won't go down nohow. Then we have to pump them down."

"Pump them down!" cried Alec in astonishment. "What do you mean?"

"Why, we fasten a hose to the sharp end of the stake, and the engine sucks the mud or sand up

through the hose as we work the stake down. I tell you them stakes *never* comes up!"

"Does it take long to stake out an oyster-bed?" asked Alec.

"Well, that depends upon the weather and the mud and a lot of other things. If an oyster captain is too busy to put down his own poles, he can get a stake sticker to do it for him."

"What's that?"

"Oh! There's lots of men with little boats, who ain't got money enough to start oystering themselves, that make a business of putting out stakes for men who have beds. They charge a dollar a stake, and in a good day they can put down twenty-five or thirty stakes."

"Whew! There must be big money in that. I should think everybody would become stake stickers instead of oystermen."

"It ain't as good as it sounds. A man has to own a boat before he can be even a stake sticker. And he's got to hire two or three men to help him, and pay for the poles as well. And then it's work that lasts only a little while each year. So I reckon there ain't so much in it after all."

"Likely not," said Alec. "It's like a lot of other things in life. The less you know about it, the better it looks."

Just then the captain's voice was heard. "Hey! Kid! Come here."

Alec turned and saw the captain beckoning to him. He made his way back to the pilot-house.

"We're almost to our grounds," said the captain, "and we don't want to lose a minute. Pull on them oilskins. You can't ketch oysters in them duds of yourn. You'd soon be soaked."

The captain pointed to a suit of oilskins hanging above his bunk. Alec pulled the waterproof clothes, which were bright yellow in color, over his other clothes, and exchanged his cap for the captain's sou'wester. Then he took off his shoes and got into the captain's boots.

"Bishop will tell you what to do, young 'un," said the captain, "and be darned careful about them winder chains. More'n one man's had his arm took off in this fleet by winder chains."

Alec went forward. "What do you want me to do?" he asked the sailor.

"You help me handle this dredge. We pull it in this way," and he indicated how he and Alec were to take hold of it. "And then we grab them round rings and dump the oysters out on the deck. Then we shove the dredge overboard again and go to culling. I'll show you how to do that when we get some oysters. We're almost there now. See them four bunches of stakes? They're the corners of our grounds."

"How big is this bed?" asked Alec.

"I reckon about ten acres, but Cap'n Rumford's got a good many other beds farther out. I reckon he must have more'n a thousand acres of oysters."

"Cap'n Rumford?" asked Alec. "Who's he? I thought our captain's name was Bagley."

The sailor looked at Alec and laughed. "So it is," he said. "But he's merely the cap'n of this boat. Cap'n Rumford's the owner of the outfit. We're just workin' for him."

"Do you dredge all the oysters from those thousand acres?"

"Lord bless you!" laughed the sailor. "It takes a whole fleet to do that. Cap'n Rumford has three or four boats going all the time."

"Isn't that an awful lot of oysters—a thousand acres?"

"I reckon it's just about the biggest oyster-bed down here. You're dead lucky to start oystering with the Rumford outfit, lad. As long as you do the right thing by the cap'n, he'll sure treat you white."

Just then the cook and the engineer came on deck. "Now me and you will handle this dredge," said Sailor Bishop, "and Dick and Joe'll take care of the other. Just git over on that side of the dredge. And watch them chains. We're almost ready."

The *Bertha B* passed one of the clumps of stakes that Sailor Bishop had pointed out.

And at once, "Let go your dredges!" came the order from the pilot-house.

Alec and the sailor seized the starboard dredge by which they stood, and Dick and Joe grasped the other; and both dredges shot overboard at the same instant. The chains paid out against the vertical rollers with a loud rattle. Alec stood silent,

eagerly awaiting the first haul. He wondered what would be in the dredge. The engine continued to churn up the water, and the *Bertha B* forged ahead, dragging her heavy, clumsy dredges behind her.

"How deep is this bed?" asked Alec.

"About eighteen or twenty feet, I reckon."

"Are they all as deep as that?"

"No. Some of them ain't more than ten feet deep. It all depends upon ——"

Suddenly there was a loud, clanking sound in the hold. The chain of the starboard dredge began to grow taut.

"Look out for that chain," warned the sailor again, as it began to reel up.

Suddenly the dredge shot out of water and followed the chain over the roller. Alec and the sailor grabbed it and shoved it to the deck. In another second they had thrust the dredge back over the side.

The sailor picked up a culling hammer, which was very much like an enlarged tack-hammer, and fell to sorting oysters. The very largest he put in a basket by themselves. These were "primes," and there were few of them. The remaining oysters, the "culls," he dropped into another basket as fast as he could sort them out. Many old oyster shells had come up with the dredge. These and the "rattlers" (oysters with cracked or broken shells), the sailor raked into a little pile by themselves with his culling hammer. The rattlers were

detected by tapping the shells with the hammer. They gave forth a hollow, rattling sound.

Alec dropped on one knee, in imitation of his companion, and also began to cull the oysters. At first he was somewhat clumsy; but with a little practice, he acquired considerable dexterity. In the heap with the oysters were a few clams, a small crab, a conch shell, and an evil-looking fish, that the sailor struck in the head with his culling hammer and contemptuously called a "Cape May minister." When the sailor had filled his basket with cull oysters, he dumped it in the middle of the deck hard against the pilot-house. Then he dropped a single oyster in a basket that stood in front of the winders. Alec filled his basket and the sailor dumped it also and dropped another oyster in the basket. It was the method of keeping tally.

Meantime the other dredge had come aboard, and Dick and Joe were also hard at it. The captain, operating the dredges from the pilot-house, brought up the dredges at frequent intervals. When the starboard dredge chain began to wind up again, Alec and the sailor seized their shovels and shoveled the old shells and rattlers overboard again. But try as they would, they could hardly cull their pile of oysters before another dredgeful came aboard. Alec observed that Sailor Bishop was much the quickest of the three men at the dredges. He determined to watch him closely and try to become just as expert himself.

Also he understood why the captain had had him

don water-proof clothes. The deck was adrip with water from the oysters, and every few minutes a wave splashed against the side of the boat, drenching the schooner with spray. Without the oilskins Alec would soon have been wet to the hide.

He found, too, that he needed more than oilskins to protect him. His fingers were rapidly becoming raw, and he saw that they would soon be cut to the bone by the sharp shells. His companions all wore rubber finger-stalls and Alec sighed with relief when he found that he could borrow some for his own fingers.

Presently Alec noticed that another oyster-boat was dredging in the adjoining bed. As the two boats sailed back and forth, passing and repassing each other, Alec couldn't help thinking how much like two farmers they were, plowing in adjoining fields. The other boat was one of the few ships in the fleet that still operated by wind power. Alec thought her a beautiful sight as she heeled over before the sharp wind, and sent the waves foaming from her bow and the spray dashing high. And she was far more picturesque than the *Bertha B*, which spread no sails at all. For this ship had all her sails set, and her steersman stood on deck in the open, vigorously twirling his steering-wheel.

The day wore on. Monotonously the *Bertha B's* propeller churned the yeasty waves. The winders rattled and clanked. Regularly the dredges came aboard and were dropped back again into the waves. The wind blew fresh. The sun shone bright. The

waves sparkled. The pile of oysters before the pilot-house grew larger and larger. From time to time the cook slipped into the cabin, and Bishop stepped across the deck to help Joe with the other dredge. Now that he had acquired some facility in handling the oysters, and his fingers no longer smarted with the salt water, Alec enjoyed every moment. He didn't feel the least bit seasick, and the cool, fresh air was delightful to breathe. But he could see that in cold, stormy weather it would be anything but fun to work on the open deck of an oyster-boat. Time passed faster than he dreamed. For suddenly the *Bertha B's* whistle blew. The oystermen stopped work as though they had been shot.

"What's wrong?" asked Alec.

"Nothing," said Bishop. "It's time for dinner."

"But it *can't* be noon yet," insisted Alec.

"It isn't. We eat dinner at ten o'clock on an oyster-boat."

"Well, I'm not sorry to hear it," said Alec. "It can't come too early for me."

After dinner, dredging was resumed. By mid afternoon more than four hundred baskets of oysters were heaped up on deck of the *Bertha B.* Then the dredges were stowed aboard, and the ship headed for the mouth of the river. From every direction other boats were making for the same point. But this time there was no bar visible. There was water aplenty. Up the river raced the

oyster-boats, sometimes three and even four abreast, every ship piled high with oysters. On the way up the river supper was served. Before five o'clock the *Bertha B* had reached the oyster piers. She pulled on past them to a huge float, on which the oysters were shoveled to allow them to lie in the brackish water to fatten. Then the deck was washed and the implements stowed in the hold. Captain Bagley headed the *Bertha B* down-stream once more, and in a few minutes she was moored snugly to the very pier on which Alec had sought shelter the night before.

But it was a very different world to Alec. He had a warm place to sleep on the *Bertha B*; he had all he could eat; he had a job; and he had found friends. He didn't know yet how much his job would pay him, for it hadn't occurred to him to ask. It was enough for the present to know that he had work and would no longer have to go hungry. About his new friends he knew almost nothing; but he felt sure they were going to be friends, for they all had treated him in a kindly fashion. Concerning his future he had as yet little idea. A few weeks previously it had never occurred to him that he would ever be an oysterman. But now that he had had a taste of oystering and had begun to get an insight into it, he saw at once that it was entirely possible that he might become an oysterman. He knew that men could rise in the oyster business as well as in any other. Like the sensible boy he was, Alec told himself that he would work as hard as

he could, learn all he could, and earn and save all he could. If he got ready for an opportunity, the opportunity might come. Now that he did have to support himself, he meant to make the best job of it he knew how.

CHAPTER V

EVENING AT THE OYSTER PIER

ON the way across the river every man in the crew had pulled off his oilskins, and now all were ready to go ashore.

“Come along with me, Alec,” said Captain Bagley as he scrambled over the rail.

The *Bertha B's* pier, and all the other piers, were covered for the greater part of their length by an enormous roof sloping up to the building that extended along the landward side of the piers. This building, hundreds of feet in length, was tenanted by the various oyster shippers. Each occupied a small section of it containing wareroom and storage compartments on the pier level, and office rooms on the floor above. At every pier little openings, like tiny tunnels, led through this long building to the wide shipping platform on the farther side, where the trains were loaded.

Captain Bagley entered one of these tunnel-like passages, but half-way through he stepped into a little wareroom, nearly filled with sacked oysters, and mounted some narrow wooden stairs. Alec followed close at his heels. The stairs led to the office of Captain Rumford, and that individual was

sitting behind his desk, addressing shipping tags. He looked up as Captain Bagley entered, said "Hello!" and went on addressing tags. Captain Bagley sat down in a chair, by the pot-bellied stove in the centre of the room, and motioned for Alec to occupy a second chair.

On the walls were hung pictures of boats, gaudy advertising calendars of oyster shippers and ship-chandlers, with models of oyster-boats, that Alec found very interesting. Oilskins hung on pegs and long boots stood in a corner, showing that Captain Rumford was as well prepared for bad weather as any of his sailors. Alec rightly guessed that sometimes he went along with his boats to the oyster grounds.

When Captain Rumford had finished his tags, he laid down his pen, turned away from his desk, and tilted back in his chair. "Well, Bagley, how did it go to-day?" he asked.

"Not so bad, not so bad," replied Captain Bagley, "everything considered. Looked bad for a time, though. That Hawley got drunk last night and snuk off after he'd had his breakfast. But this kid turned up and took his place. Then old Hardy fouled us and broke his bowsprit, and that held us up so long we got stuck on the bar. Every boat in the fleet got hung up. Bar was clean out o' water. Made us late gettin' out. But we got more than four hundred baskets at that. Not so bad, eh? Not so bad."

"Good enough, Bagley. Who is the lad?"

"Name's Alec Cunningham," said Captain Bagley. "Alec, this is Captain Rumford."

Alec sprang to his feet, stepped to the captain's side, and shook hands with him.

He knew at once that he was going to like Captain Rumford. The captain's glance seemed to bore right through Alec. He felt as though the captain could read everything that was in his mind. But there was a kindly expression about his face that won Alec instantly.

"Where do you come from?" asked Captain Rumford. "I never saw you around here."

"He come from up in Pennsylvania," said Captain Bagley, "and he's a nephew of my old buddy, Thomas Robinson, that was drowned when the *Mary Ford's* anchor purchase parted last spring. His parents is dead and he come here to find his uncle. Hit here last night without a cent and slept out on our pier in them oyster sacks. Darned wonder he didn't freeze to death."

"That's a shame," exclaimed Captain Rumford, "with so many bunks around here he could have slept in. Why, there's half a dozen in this office."

"It didn't hurt me any," laughed Alec, "but it *was* cold." And a little shiver ran down his back at the recollection of his chilly bed.

"Wonder where Hawley got his booze," said Captain Rumford presently. "He was a pretty good man, wasn't he? What are you going to do with him?"

"Yes. He was a good worker, but I ain't got

time to fool with that kind o' cattle. I'll tell him to go aboard and get his things. I've got to have men I can depend on."

Captain Rumford arose and began to pull on his overcoat. "Time to be getting home," he said. "Just a word with you, Bagley, before I go." He entered an inner room, followed by his ship captain. "Does this young chap intend to become an oysterman?" asked the shipper.

"I don't know that, Cap'n," replied the master of the *Bertha B.* "He was flat on his back when he struck here and would probably have taken any job he could get. Hadn't had anything to eat for twenty-four hours."

"Well, he's got a good, clean face. I like the cut of his jib. Got lots of grit, if I ain't mistaken. Looks as though he knew something, too."

"He's a wireless man. Got an outfit with him that he made himself. He's had a high school education, too."

"He has, eh? Well, I've been sizing him up, and I thought he was a clever lad. Got the making of a good man in him. How does he work?"

"Good! Mighty good. Took right hold like an old-timer. Just had to see a thing done once, and he picked it up as though he had done it all his life."

"Know anything about his habits?"

"No. But he don't use tobacco, and I'm pretty sure he never touched booze."

"Well, take care of him, but don't spoil him."

Put him through the mill and see what he's got in him. If he's the lad I take him to be, we don't want him to get away from us. It's hard to find really good men nowadays. Well, I must get home. Now mind you don't spoil him."

When the two men came back into the main office Captain Rumford said rather severely, "Young man, Captain Bagley wants to take you on as a regular hand. He says he's going to fire the fellow who was drunk this morning. I don't know about it. I don't know about it. It's a risky thing to do, when we're so short handed. Jim Hawley is a good worker."

"Oh, sir, if only you will let me stay," pleaded Alec, "you'll never be sorry. It's true I don't know anything about oystering yet, but I can learn, sir. And I can and will work as hard as anybody. I need the work—need it terribly. Please, sir, give me a chance."

"Well," said the shipper, "I make it a rule not to interfere with my captains. Bagley says he wants you, and I suppose I shall have to humor him. Your uncle was a great friend of his. But mind, you can't hold a job on one of my boats just because your uncle was a friend of the skipper. I'll give you a job. But it's up to you to keep it. Understand?"

"Thank you, sir. Thank you," said Alec gratefully. "It's very good of you to give me the chance. I'll try to make good, sir. I can learn as well as anybody."

"Very well. We will see what you can do. Now I must be getting home, or I'll have to account to Mrs. Rumford for this extra half hour."

The captain's face was as stern as ever, but there was a twinkle in his eyes that belied the sternness. And the tone in which the skipper said, "Good night, Bagley," confirmed Alec's first impression that Captain Rumford had a soft heart under his somewhat rough exterior.

The three oystermen went down-stairs. Captain Rumford locked the door and went to his automobile, parked on the farther side of the railroad. Alec and Captain Bagley turned back toward the pier shed. To Alec, the interview just ended seemed momentous. He had a job. He had a start in life. But little did he dream what a part this half hour in the oyster shipper's office was destined to play in his life.

It was still daylight, though dusk was at hand. "If it's all right," said Alec, "I'd like to look around a bit."

"Look as much as you like," said Captain Bagley. "But you'd better turn in early. You know we have to be out to the oyster-beds by sunup. Hello! There's Hawley now."

Alec waited to see what would happen. The big oysterman came swinging along under the pier shed, just sufficiently unsteady on his feet to betray the fact that he had been drinking again.

"Go aboard and get your duds," called Captain Bagley sharply, as the man came up to him. "You

can get what's due you on Friday when the rest are paid."

"What do you mean?"

"You know well enough what I mean. Take your clothes out of my boat and don't you set foot in her again."

The drunken oysterman leered at Captain Bagley. "You can't fire me. You've got only three men left and there ain't another hand to be had."

"There ain't, eh? Well, here's one. He did your work to-day, and he's going to do it every day. See? Now get your things out of the *Bertha B* and be quick about it."

Instantly a change came over the oysterman. "Take the bread from an honest man's mouth, would you?" he snarled, turning upon Alec. "Take his job away from him, would you? You young pup, I'll fix you!"

His attitude was so threatening that Alec stepped back in alarm.

Captain Bagley grasped the sailor by the arm and spun him around. "You get your clothes and get out here before you get in trouble," he said sternly.

The oysterman swore viciously, but obeyed, and went shambling down the pier to the boat.

"You'd better keep your weather-eye on him," said the captain. "I don't believe he'd really try to hurt you, but he's a bad actor when he gets drunk. So just watch him. I'll go aboard and see that he behaves himself on the *Bertha B*."

Alec hastened to have a look at his surroundings before darkness came. Although it was late in the day, there was still much activity on the piers, for this was the rush season. In the slips between piers were many square-ended scows, some loaded deep with oysters that were covered with burlap sacks against a sudden cold snap, while others were entirely emptied of their cargo, their sacks laid in neat piles amidships.

Still other scows were being unloaded. Mostly four scow men were at work in each scow, counting and culling the oysters. As fast as the baskets were filled, they were hoisted to the piers, where other men emptied them into sacks and tossed the empty baskets back into the scows. Six baskets filled a sack. The sacks were sewed up as fast as they were filled, and trundled off on trucks to the waiting cars. Such rattlers and empty shells as had gotten in among the good oysters were thrown in little heaps in the centres of the scows.

Presently Alec saw a rough looking old fellow sculling a flat-bottomed boat into a slip where some empty scows were floating.

"Can I have your shells, Cap'n?" asked the boatman of the shipper who stood on the pier, sewing up the last of his sacks.

"Sure," said the shipper, and the old boatman began to shovel the shells from the scows into his own boat.

"Now I wonder what he wants with those shells," thought Alec. Then, following his rule,

he decided to watch and see what the old fellow did with them.

As there were six scows to clean, it was evident that it would take him some time to get all the shells; so Alec walked on. He went past pier after pier. On most of them, men were just finishing their day's work, sewing up and trundling away the last of their oysters. On some piers were great rows of barrels, such as had sheltered Alec from the wind on Captain Rumford's pier. On practically every pier baskets were stacked up like the barrels; and when Alec noticed how wet they were, he rightly guessed that they were left out in the wind to dry. On some piers seines were hung up on long poles that extended from rafter to rafter. Yawl boats, most of them equipped with gasoline engines, floated in the slips. And several had been stowed on piers. One by one the oyster craft were tying up at the ends of the piers, so that the river began to present as crowded an appearance as it had in the early morning.

At the end of the pier shed was a big blacksmith shop, with quantities of dredges, anchors, and other boat equipment to be mended.

Alec went around the end of the pier house and started back along the wide shipping platform. He was amazed to see that three lines of cars on three parallel tracks stood ready to receive the day's yield of oysters. Little, metal markers, labeled Scranton, Wilkes-Barre, Williamsport, New York, and so on, were stuck in the doors of the various

cars, to help the men trucking the oysters get them in the proper cars. The strings of cars reached the full length of the oyster sheds, which must have been at least two hundred yards; and Alec saw at once that when the three strings were coupled in one train, there would be considerably more than a third of a mile of oysters going to market. When he remembered that he had seen another train at the oyster sheds across the river, he suddenly realized what an enormous industry this oyster business was, and what a lot of money there must be in it for successful oyster shippers. It made him more determined than ever to look into the situation well and see if his opportunity in life might not lie right here.

As Alec walked along the shipping platform, his wonder grew. Here were telegraph stations, butcher shops, ship-chandleries, where one could buy almost anything needed aboard ship, and so on, as well as the offices of the oystermen. Overhead swung the signs of the different shippers, and Alec was interested in reading them. On these signs he saw many of the names he had seen earlier in the day on the oyster-boats themselves; and he guessed that many of these boats, like the *Bertha B* and the *Mary and Willie*, must have been named after members of the shippers' families.

By the time Alec had completed the circuit of the oyster sheds, and gotten back to the slip where the old man was collecting shells, it was almost dark. The shell collector was just sculling his craft out

of the slip into the river. Alec walked to the end of the pier and saw that the man was pointing his boat up-stream. Deciding to follow him on land, Alec hurried along under the pier shed in pursuit.

Long before this the electric lights had been lighted, and Alec did not realize how dark it really was until he had passed beyond the shed under the open sky. At first he could hardly see anything. Once he glanced back, and in the faint light from the pier shed made out the form of a man behind him. As he went on, he heard footsteps coming close, but thought nothing of it. He came to a little landing place built of a few planks, that projected well out over the water. His eyes had now grown accustomed to the dark, and he cautiously made his way out on this landing, to look for the shell collector. He was surprised to hear a tread behind him on the landing. Just as he turned to see who was coming, there was a rush of feet on the planks, a hoarse voice cursed him viciously, and in another instant powerful arms grasped him and flung him headlong into the swirling tide.

CHAPTER VI

OVERBOARD IN THE DARK

DOWN, down, down into the chilling water went Alec. So confused was he that he did not know which way was down and which was up. He opened his eyes but the muddy water was inky black and he could see nothing. So sudden and unexpected had been the attack that he had not had time even to catch his breath before he sank beneath the water. Immediately he began to suffer for air.

Instinctively Alec struck out, but after a few strokes he stopped swimming. He was recovering his wits rapidly, and he realized that it was worse than useless to try to swim until he knew in which direction he was going. He might swim under a scow or boat and be drowned. It was fortunate indeed that Alec ceased swimming when he did, for the tide and his own efforts were taking him directly under a big oyster-float. The instant he stopped swimming, the lifting force of the water shot him upward. It was high time he got his head above water, for his lungs seemed about to burst. He knew he could not hold his breath much longer.

With quick wit he raised his hands above his head the instant he felt himself rising. And it was

well he did so. Hardly had he lifted them before he crashed into one of the great timbers of the oyster-float. The impact almost broke his fingers; and although his hands lessened the force of the blow, nevertheless he bumped his head so hard that for an instant he was dazed. His extended hands alone had saved him from being knocked senseless and drowned. For a second he lost control of himself and swallowed some water. Sudden terror clutched his heart. He realized that in another moment he might drown. Wildly, frantically, he clawed at the timber above him. One hand met solid wood wherever it moved. But the other shot upward into the free air. With his last remaining ounce of strength Alec dragged himself from under the log that formed the edge of the float and pulled himself up until his nose was above water.

Shuddering, gasping, gulping in both air and water, Alec clung to the log desperately. Panic took possession of him. He tried to cry out, but succeeded only in swallowing more water. Wildly he clutched the float and tried to draw himself up on it; but the great round log, slippery with mud and slime, gave him not the slightest finger hold. Almost exhausted and nearly paralyzed with cold, he slipped back into the water. But his hands still rested on the log.

Then he took a grip on himself and choked back the wave of fear that was chilling his heart worse than the cold water was numbing his muscles. He

let his body sink in the flood until only his nose and eyes were above water; and clinging to the log, he remained perfectly still for a moment to recruit his waning strength. Meantime his mind and his eyes were both busy.

By this time his eyes were free from water and accustomed to the darkness. He could see fairly well. A hasty glance showed him a long line of floats, oyster-boats, scows, and similar craft moored parallel with the shore. He was in the smooth water between float and shore and only a few yards distant from solid ground. With that realization a wave of courage swept over Alec that seemed almost to warm him. For now he knew he should get out all right. He had only to swim the little distance between float and shore and he was safe.

Boldly he struck out, and a few strokes carried him close to the bank. His foot touched bottom. He swam another stroke or two and put his feet down to walk ashore. Then he gave a cry of terror as he felt himself sinking down, down, down into the terrible, black, clinging mud. He tried to raise his foot, but only sank the deeper. Already he was in mud above his knees, and his nose was frightfully close to the surface of the water. Through his head flashed the memory of the oyster stakes in the muddy bottom of the Bay—six feet deep in the mud, so Sailor Bishop had told him, and held so tight that they could not be pulled out. A fresh wave of fear swept over him.

But he fought desperately to keep his wits. He

realized that his broad shoes would not go down into the mud like the sharpened ends of poles. He stood perfectly still to see whether or not he was still sinking deeper. When he realized that he was not, he could have shouted for joy. The tide was running out, and the water would not come up over his head, even if the mud did hold him prisoner for a time. But soon he realized that cold could kill him quite as effectively as water. For now that the fear of drowning had left him, he became conscious of the fact that he was shaking all over and that his teeth were chattering terribly. He must get out and get out at once. But how should he get out? He dared not move, lest he sink deeper into the mud. And there did not appear to be a soul anywhere around. There were no lights near. It was supper time, and everybody had gone home for the night.

Suddenly he heard the steady put-put-put of a motor-boat coming up the river. The sound drew near.

"Help! Help! Help!" cried Alec at the top of his voice.

But the boat continued to chug steadily upstream, its rhythmic put-put-put-put drowning out all sound of Alec's feeble cries. Again and again Alec called for help, but the boat went steadily on. It passed the craft moored below Alec. It came abreast of the oyster-float. Still Alec's cries were unheard. As the boat came directly opposite him, Alec gathered his remaining strength for a last

effort and fairly screamed, "Help! Help! Help!"

There was a sudden commotion on the motor-boat. The steersman rose to his feet and peered into the darkness. A second man shut off the engine.

"Hello!" hailed a voice from the boat. "Where are you?"

"Back of the oyster-float near shore," cried Alec. "I'm stuck in the mud."

"Stand still and we'll get you in a minute," came the quick response.

"Put-put-put," went the little motor-boat again, and in another moment it was alongside the float. A sailor leaped from the boat, with a coil of rope in his hand. He splashed his way across the float, calling, "Where are you?"

"Right here," called Alec, raising his arms above the water and waving them in air.

"Catch this rope," answered the sailor, and a line came whizzing straight into Alec's upraised arms.

"I've got it," said Alec.

"Tie it under your arms and hold fast."

Alec's hands shook so that he could hardly knot the rope, but finally he had it fast about his chest. He grasped the rope at arms' length. "All right," he cried.

"Heave ho!" sang the voice on the float. "Here you come, my hearty." And the rope tightened.

Alec pulled on the rope as hard as he could, and

worked his feet loose. The instant he was free from the mud, he went skimming through the water to the side of the float, where strong arms lifted him up.

"You didn't have much to go on," said the sailor. "It's a darned good thing for you that the tide was running out instead of in. Who are you, and how'd you come to get in the water? Been drinking?"

"My name's Alec Cunningham, and I belong on the *Bertha B*. Somebody threw me overboard." Alec's teeth were chattering so that he couldn't say another word.

"Drunk as a fool," said the sailor. "Bagley don't have any hand named Cunningham. Wish I knowed where he belonged."

"I'm not drunk," said Alec, shivering more violently than before, "and I do belong on the *Bertha B*. Just went to work this morning."

"Maybe he ain't drunk," said the steersman on the boat, as they stepped aboard. "Maybe he does belong on her. We'll go see. We got to take him somewhere darned quick or he'll freeze to death."

The motor-boat was headed down-stream and in a few minutes came alongside the *Bertha B*. "Hello, Bagley!" called the steersman.

"Hello!" cried the skipper on the *Bertha B*, coming out on deck.

"Do you know a young fellow named Cunningham? Says he belongs to your crew."

"Sure I do. What's happened to him?"

"We got him here. Just fished him out of the river."

"The deuce you did! Get him in here quick before he freezes."

Alec was helped aboard the *Bertha B*. He tried to thank the men who had rescued him.

"Shut up and git in there by the fire," shouted Captain Bagley.

Alec hustled into the cabin. In all his life fire had never felt so good.

"Boys," said Captain Bagley, "you saved a darned nice kid. How'd he git in the water?"

"Says somebody throwed him in. Don't *look* as though he was drunk, though."

"No. He ain't drunk. And if he says somebody throwed him in, why, somebody did. I'll find out about this. Good night." Captain Bagley turned toward his cabin. "The old rip!" he muttered. "I knowed he was a bad actor, but I never dreamed he'd attempt murder."

Then the captain was inside the cabin. "Strip them clothes off, quick!" he called to Alec. Then turning to the engineer, he said, "What you standing there for, Joe? Git the coffee-pot on and stir up the fire."

Captain Bagley seemed equal to any emergency. Before you could bat an eye he had pulled the wet garments from Alec's shivering form and was rubbing him with a rough towel. He rubbed until Alec's skin was aglow. Then he dived into his

bunk and from his locker drew out a clean suit of heavy woolen underwear.

"Warm these," he said, handing the garments to Joe, while he himself fell to rubbing and slapping Alec with his hands.

"Now git into them duds quick," he ordered, as Joe passed Alec the underclothes, which he had been holding before the fire.

As Alec pulled on the warm clothes, the captain said, "Git this inside you," and he poured out a cup of black coffee that was smoking hot.

Alec downed the draught, though it almost burned his mouth. The captain poured another cup.

"Drink it," he said. Again he turned to the engineer. "See if Dick's got any lemons in his cupboard."

The engineer found some. "Give 'em to me," said the captain. In a second he had cut them in half and was squeezing out the juice. "Put a quart of water over the open fire, Joe," he said.

Joe got the water. Captain Bagley poured the lemon juice into it, and added some sugar. In no time the mixture was steaming.

"Drink it," said the captain.

"I'm full," said Alec. "I just had two cups of hot coffee."

"Shut up and drink it," said the captain.

As Alec took the proffered draught and began to sip it, the captain roared, "Drink it!" And Alec downed the whole quart.

“Now stand just as close to the fire as you can. Joe, put on more draft. Can’t you get her any hotter?”

The stove was already cherry red, but that did not satisfy the energetic skipper. Joe poked up the fire and Alec got as close to the stove as he could. Soon he began to perspire profusely.

“Good!” said the oyster skipper, as he saw the beads of sweat gather and run down Alec’s face. “Now, you young rascal, tell us how all this happened.”

Briefly Alec related the story of his adventure.

“Who done it?” demanded Captain Bagley.

“I—I—I wouldn’t like to say,” said Alec, “because I am not absolutely certain. I’d hate to accuse any man of attempting to commit murder unless I was sure. I never really saw the man because it was so dark.”

“Ain’t you got any idea who it was?”

“All I’ve got to go on is the voice. I could hear that in the dark as well as in the light.”

“Had you heard it before?”

“Yes, sir. It sounded very much like the voice of the man you discharged.”

“I reckon you are right, youngster. I reckon you are right. I only wish you was a little more certain about it. He ought to go to prison. But I’d like to have sufficient evidence to make a case before I have him arrested. Maybe I can find somebody who seen him in that neighborhood. I’ll scout around a bit and see what I can pick up.”

"I wouldn't want him imprisoned," said Alec. "He didn't do me any harm, even if he did try to."

"We don't know yet whether he did you any harm or not, and anyhow, that's got nothing to do with it. We can't afford to have that sort of cattle running at large."

Captain Bagley sat down and pondered over the matter for some time. "How do you feel?" he asked suddenly.

"Pretty good," said Alec, "though my head aches something fierce. I reckon it's from the bump I got."

"Well, that settles it. You don't ketch no oysters to-morrow."

"What do you mean?" asked Alec.

"I mean that you are not going out to the oyster grounds."

"Indeed I am," said Alec. "I'd be a nice sort of a pill to lay off when you're so short handed, just because I got a ducking."

"Don't you give me any back talk," said the skipper, "or I'll throw you overboard again. I know a lot more about falling into cold water than you do. You may have a high fever by morning. And anyway, it's going to be a darned nasty day. There's a storm brewin', and you'd more than likely get sick. Then I would be up against it, wouldn't I, with only three hands to work two dredges. I've got to have men I can depend upon."

"You can depend upon me," protested Alec. "I'll work even if I am sick. Won't you let me

go, please? I just can't afford to lose a day. I need the money so bad, sir."

"What for? You got a place to sleep and plenty to eat. Why do you need money so bad?"

Alec turned his face away from the captain. "It's some bills I owe at home," he said. There were tears in his voice, though he kept them out of his eyes, and the captain forbore to question him.

"All right, lad," he said, in a tone of wonderful tenderness, "you shall have your day's work. But you will have to do it ashore. I'll get one of Zipp's men to help me and you can help Zipp."

"Who's Zipp, and what does he do?"

"Oh! That's Frank Jordan, the foreman of the scow gang. Zipp's his nickname. He handles the oysters after we put them on the float. Now you just stay by the fire and sweat, while I go to the office and talk to the captain."

Captain Bagley let himself into the office with his key, turned up the lights, and in a moment was talking to Captain Rumford over the telephone.

"Sure," said the boss, when Captain Bagley had told him of Alec's mishap and his plan for an exchange of men. "I'll call up Zipp right away, and one of his men will be on hand in the morning. Leave the kid in the office if you get away before Zipp gets there. We'll take good care of him."

CHAPTER VII

A LETTER FOR ALEC

SO it came about that when the *Bertha B* sailed for the oyster grounds next morning, Alec was not aboard of her. He passed a restless night in his bunk, and was astir the moment Dick arrived to start breakfast. He pulled on his clothes and set about helping the cook, who knew nothing whatever about Alec's adventure. He raked the fire, put on fresh coal, filled the coffee-pot with water from the cask on deck, and tried to make himself unobtrusively helpful. His head still ached, and he did not feel very well. In his secret heart he was glad enough that the captain would not allow him to go out to the oyster grounds.

When he had eaten his breakfast, Alec went ashore with the skipper, while the boats moored outside the *Bertha B* were casting loose. Captain Bagley opened the office and stirred the fire.

"Keep it warm in here," he said to Alec. "You can set and sleep in this easy chair, or you can lay down on a bunk in the other room. Now take care of yourself." And the captain was off.

For a time Alec sat by the fire, thinking over

the events of the past few days. Then he fell to meditating on what he ought to do with himself. He had never had a consuming desire to do any one thing in life in preference to all other tasks, as some boys have. Always he had cared more for boats and the water than for any other form of sport; but it had never occurred to him that boating might in some sense become his life-work. Now the possibility seemed very real, and not at all distasteful. But if he became an oysterman, he wanted to be more than merely a deck-hand. He wanted to climb up, to be at the top of the business instead of the bottom. When he remembered what he had been told as to the difficulties of becoming an oyster-planter and of the large amount of money required, he could see no way to achieve such an end. He did not see how he could ever earn and save enough money to buy an oyster-boat. Alec was a lad of good sense, however, and after speculating about the matter for a time, he suddenly said to himself, "This is all foolishness. You don't even know yet whether or not you want to be an oysterman. If you do, the best way to succeed is to learn all about the business you can. So you had better get out and make use of your time, instead of loafing here."

He left the office and went down to the pier shed. Practically all the oyster-boats had cast off and were on their way to the Bay. Alec could see their lights twinkling in the darkness over a long stretch of river. It was still too early for those who

worked about the piers to be on hand, so Alec had the pier shed pretty much to himself. He walked up and down, looking at everything that interested him.

Presently the night-watchman came along, lantern in hand, and looked at him pretty sharply. "Looking for somebody?" he asked; and Alec saw the man was suspicious of him.

"Just waiting for Captain Rumford or some of his scow men," said Alec. "I'm working for the captain. Went out on the *Bertha B* yesterday, but I'm going to work here to-day."

The watchman seemed satisfied. "You're working for a fine man," he said. "There ain't none better than Captain Rumford."

Together they strolled along until they came to Captain Rumford's pier. In the slip were four oyster scows, their bottoms littered with old shells. All the other scows about had been cleaned and put in order.

"The captain won't like that," said the watchman. "That's twice lately that nobody got his shells. He's the very deuce for having things orderly."

"What do you mean?" asked Alec. "Was somebody supposed to take those shells away?" And he thought of the old man he had been following when he was thrown overboard.

"Sure. There are several fellows that collect 'em, and the captain always gives 'em to the first fellow that asks for 'em, though old Pete usually

gets 'em. But the captain don't care who takes 'em, so his scows are clean."

"What does anybody want old oyster shells for?" demanded Alec. "Why, I saw an old man with a whole boat load of them."

"They want 'em to sell," explained the watchman. "Guess you don't know much about the oyster business yet."

"Don't know a thing," said Alec. "Never saw an oyster-boat before yesterday. I can't imagine how anybody could sell all the shells that old fellow had in his boat."

"A fellow could sell a million bushels of 'em if he had 'em," said the watchman. "You know the oyster-planters put these shells back in the oyster-beds in spring. They buy 'em back from these fellows at five cents a bushel."

"What!" exclaimed Alec. "The planters sow oyster shells in their beds! Surely you can't grow little oysters from old shells!"

The watchman laughed heartily at Alec. "Of course you can't grow little oysters *from* old shells. But you can grow 'em *on* old shells."

"I don't understand."

"Why, the little oysters—spats we calls 'em—just floats about in the water after they are born, and if they didn't have anything to fasten to, they'd all die and be lost. There ain't nothin' they can fasten to on the mud bottoms, so the oystermen puts down old shells and the spats makes fast to 'em."

"Well, I never!" exclaimed Alec. "There's a

whole lot more to oystering than I ever dreamed. I reckon what you say accounts for the way oysters grow in clusters. We dredged up lots of clusters of oysters with four or five oysters stuck together. And now that I think of it, I remember that there were usually one or two old shells in each cluster."

"I reckon Captain Rumford will be right mad when he sees them shells in the scows," said the watchman. "I heard him giving Pete—that's the old fellow you spoke of—the deuce only last week for not getting the scows clean on time. You see, it's the rush season. Help is short, and it's all the captain can do to keep up with his orders. Now these scows will have to be cleaned before any more oysters can be fetched."

"Then I'll clean them," said Alec, and getting some baskets, he dropped into the nearest scow. The watchman moved on about his work.

In no time Alec had the scow clean and her burlap sacks piled neatly in the centre. He hoisted his baskets of shells to the pier and tackled the next scow.

Captain Rumford was on hand before any of his men came. "Who put those shells there?" he demanded, noticing the baskets Alec had placed along the edge of the pier.

"I did, sir," said Alec, somewhat fearfully.

"You did! Where did you get them, and what did you do it for?"

"I got them out of the scows, sir. They hadn't been cleaned."

"The deuce they hadn't. That's twice Pete has left my scows full of shells within two weeks. We've got to have some better method of getting rid of old shells. Can't stand this. Busy as all fiddlesticks and our scows full of shells when we come to work.

"Say, boy," said Captain Rumford after a moment's pause, "who told you to clean out those scows?"

"Nobody, sir. I thought it would help along with the day's work and I did it. I didn't know what else to do with them, so I put them in the baskets I found here."

"You've got some sense, lad. Keep on that way and you'll be an oyster shipper before you can vote."

Zipp and his two scow men soon arrived. The captain lent Alec his boots, which were far too large for Alec, and one of the scow men gave him a reefing-jacket. A motor-boat lay in the slip. Zipp started the engine, while the other men made fast the scows, and soon the little party was chugging off to an oyster-float. The four scow men sat in the motor-boat and the scows were towed behind. With great oyster-forks, somewhat like enlarged spading forks, the gang shoveled the oysters from the float into the scows. It was hard work, for the forks were large and the oysters heavy. When the oysters were all taken up, the scows were towed back to the shipping pier and made fast in the slip again. Then the counting began.

Zipp showed Alec how to count his oysters, two at a cast. The four counters dropped to their knees and began work. But Alec paused for a moment to watch his companions. He saw that Zipp could count oysters faster than either of the two other scow men, just as Sailor Bishop could cull them faster than either Joe or Dick. Alec watched Zipp closely, to see how he worked. Then he set himself to the task of learning how to count fast. He still had the finger-stalls he had worn the day before and the sharp shells did not hurt his fingers in the least. In a little while he was making the oysters fairly fly.

Basket after basket, the oysters were shoved up on the pier, where other workers emptied them into sacks. Captain Rumford himself sewed the sacks up and kept a watchful eye on things. In no time, there was a long row of sacks standing ready for shipment.

"Just keep track of the number of baskets that lad hands up," whispered the shipper to an assistant. "We'll time him for an hour." Thus Alec underwent another test, though he was altogether in ignorance of the fact that his work was being watched.

At every pier men were counting oysters, while other men filled the sacks and trundled them off to the waiting freight-cars. The place was as busy as a beehive, yet there was no noise or confusion. No swearing, no loud talk, disturbed the general quiet. Only the rumble of the trucks, as men

trundled the sacked oysters over the plank floor, rose above the subdued hum.

"Hour's up!" said Captain Rumford, glancing at his watch, after a time. "How many baskets did the kid count?"

"Seventy-seven."

"The deuce he did! Why, that's ten thousand oysters. Of course Zipp's crew average about 11,000 an hour, but they're the best crew here. The average counter won't handle more than 8,000 to 9,000 an hour. The kid's quick."

Presently the skipper got his shipping tags and tied them on the sacks. Then a man with a truck began to wheel the sacks away to the cars.

Dinner time came. All hands went up to the office to eat their lunches, about the warm stove.

"Here," said Zipp, seeing that Alec had nothing to eat, "have a sandwich."

"No. Thanks," said Alec, rather diffidently. "I am not very hungry." But his eyes belied his tongue.

"That won't do at all," said the skipper. "Take this and run over to the hotel and get a good square meal."

Alec protested. The oyster shipper shoved a dollar into his hand.

"Now run along, quick," he said, "for we've got to get right back to work as soon as we can. And none of us can work without food."

Alec was glad enough when Captain Rumford insisted, and taking the money, he hurried away to

get his dinner. The long table fairly groaned under the array of good things, and every diner was free to eat as much as he liked. For the first time in his life, Alec ate oyster potpie; and wished he could hold more. His dinner cost him seventy-five cents, and Alec began to understand how fortunate he was to be eating aboard the *Bertha B*. Even if his pay should prove to be small, he could still save something, and he needed money desperately.

Alec intended to give back to Captain Rumford the twenty-five cents left from his dollar. But the men were already in the scows when he got back and Captain Rumford was up in his office. Alec went to work, and forgot about the quarter.

All the afternoon Alec worked as fast as he could make his fingers fly. He was working alongside of Zipp, one of the most expert oyster counters at Bivalve; and it provoked Alec that he could not hand up the baskets as fast as his fellow. But try as he would, he could not fill the basket as rapidly as Zipp did. The oysters were all counted and sacked before the *Bertha B* came chugging up to her pier. Alec went aboard her as soon as she made fast, and the cook considerably gave him his supper.

Then Dick went off to buy supplies for the next day. Alec asked if he might go along. They got a roast of meat, some sausage, canned beans, butter, bread, condensed milk, and other articles.

Captain Bagley, meantime, had gone to the office

to make his daily report to Captain Rumford. That done, he started for a store to buy a cigar, when the postmaster hailed him. "Say, Cap'n," he said, "you don't know anything about a party named Cunningham, do you? I've got a letter addressed to an Alec Cunningham, care of Thomas Robinson. You and Robinson used to be such pals I thought you might know something about it."

"You've come to just the right place. That's Robinson's nephew. He's a member of my crew now. I'll just get that letter and give it to the kid."

When Captain Bagley returned to the *Bertha B* Alec was sitting alone in the cabin.

"Here's a letter for you, Alec," said the skipper.

Alec tore the letter open and ran his eye over it. Tears came into his eyes, and he bowed his head on his chest.

"What's wrong, lad?" asked the skipper, kindly.

Alec could not trust himself to reply. He merely thrust the letter into the skipper's hand.

Captain Bagley read the communication and frowned. "He's pretty much of a skunk," he said.

The letter was an imperative demand for the balance due on the tombstone Alec had ordered for his father. Unless this were first received, the letter said, the stone would not be set up.

"I judge you paid him something?" said the captain questioningly.

"Paid him half the price. It took every cent I had. That's why I landed here without a penny.

And that's why I need money so bad. Oh! I must get it somehow. I must! I must!"

"Now, don't you worry about this," said the kindly oysterman. "We can fix it up for you somehow."

But Alec refused to be comforted.

CHAPTER VIII

ALEC'S FIRST LESSON IN OYSTER-CULTURE

MORNING found Alec refreshed in body, but not entirely relieved in mind. He had loved his father dearly, and the thought that his father's body lay out in the cold, bleak cemetery without even a headstone to mark his resting-place, troubled Alec sorely. The very least he could do in memory of his father, it seemed to Alec, was to erect a marker above the grave.

To do this, he had gotten together all the money he could, and given it to a Central City monument dealer with the understanding that the latter was to set up the stone Alec selected and Alec was to pay the balance due on the stone as soon as he found work and could earn the money. But like many another man, this one had taken advantage of youth. He had pocketed the money without carrying out his part of the bargain. That was bad enough. But Alec now felt no certainty that the stone would be erected after he had paid for it in full; and that was worse still. So it was a very much troubled and worried lad that tumbled out of Alec's bunk when Dick arrived to start breakfast.

It was fortunate for Alec that he possessed such

a helpful disposition. He found a number of things to do for the cook. He stirred up the fire, got water for the coffee, punched holes in the condensed milk can, cut the bread, and made himself generally useful; and in work he found relief from his troubles. He could not keep his mind on his work and his troubles at the same time; and he had to keep it on his work.

And when breakfast was over and he had dried the dishes, there were so many things he wanted to ask the captain about. All that he had learned about oyster-culture was so interesting it made him want to learn more. And by this time he realized that there was much, much more to know.

"Captain Bagley," said Alec, when the *Bertha B* was fairly under way, "the pier watchman was telling me that the oystermen spread old shells over their oyster-beds for the young oysters to attach themselves to. How can oysters move about in the water? I should think their shells would keep them on the bottom, even though they are very small. Why, a grain of sand can't float, and see how much smaller that is than an oyster."

"Yes. It's smaller than a grown oyster, but many times as large as a brand-new oyster. And besides, oysters just born don't have any shells."

Alec looked sharply at the captain, but could not detect the faintest twinkle in his eye. "Honest?" he asked. "You're not stringing me?"

"Not a bit of it, son. Why, a new-born oyster is so small you can't even see it."

"Now I *know* you're teasing me."

"Indeed, I am not. You have to have a microscope to see an oyster that has just been born. They *have* to be very small, for a single oyster gives birth to millions of little ones. These don't have no shells at all. And then the tide sweeps 'em in and out, so I reckon they get scattered pretty much everywhere in the neighborhood of the oyster-beds."

"But how do they grow fast to old shells and other oysters if they have no shells themselves?"

"Oh! They get shells quick enough. And as soon as they do, they sink to the bottom and fasten themselves to the first clean rock or shell they come to. If they don't hit a rock or shell, they sink in the mud and die. Of course, there ain't no rocks on our mud bottom, and that's why we have to put shells on the beds. And we no sooner get the bed covered with shells than we have to scrub 'em, to get the mud off of 'em."

"Scrub them!" exclaimed Alec. "What do you mean?"

"Can't you understand English? I mean just what I say—scrub 'em, to get the dirt off."

Alec still looked incredulous. "How?" he demanded.

"Oh! We drag the dredges over the beds without any bags on. It scours 'em off pretty well. They are pretty clean before we get through."

"But is it really necessary? Did anybody ever see a tiny oyster make fast to an old shell?"

"I don't know, son. But I know this: We have

to make sure our shells is clean. We wait till the oysters is about ready to tie up to something and then we scrub the shells."

"My gracious! If there are so many little oysters and you put down so many shells to catch them, I should think there would be more oysters than you would know what to do with."

"Does seem that way, don't it? Fact is, though, that mighty few of them little ones ever gits to be oysters."

"Why not?"

"I reckon it's largely on account of what doctors would call 'infant mortality.' All sorts of things eats 'em. Mussels, and clams, and barnacles, and old oysters, and turtles, and worms, and sea-squirts, and drills, all eat oysters at some time or other. Down east the starfish plays hob with the oyster-beds. We don't have many of them things here, and I'm glad of it. If we did, I don't know how we'd ever raise any oysters. Why, even as it is, we don't get more than one oyster out of every six we plant."

"How do you know?"

"Why, we know how many bushels we plant and how many we ketch when they're old enough to be dredged. We plant about 500 bushels to an acre and we'd like to plant a thousand if we could get 'em. They're about the size of your thumb nail and there's about 700 to 900 seed-oysters in a bushel. By the time we dredge 'em we won't get more'n a basket for every bushel we planted. How

many's that? You ought to know. You counted oysters all day yesterday."

"A basket contains 68 casts," said Alec proudly, "and that's 136 oysters."

"Correct. And if you multiply that number by six, you'll have just about the number of seed-oysters in a bushel."

"If the loss is so great, I should think you would plant the full thousand bushels per acre instead of five hundred."

"We would if we could get 'em, son. But you know we get our seed-oysters out of the natural beds, and we can't dredge there except in May and June, between sunrise and sunset each day. We get all we can, of course. And then we buy some from the bushelmen."

"What are they?"

"Oh! Fellows that have small boats but no beds. They dredge what they can get and sell the seed to planters."

"They're something like the stake stickers."

"Most of 'em are stake stickers. They ketch seed-oysters in spring and stick stakes in fall."

"I should think they'd get enough money to have their own oyster-beds after a time."

"Some of 'em do, but there ain't much money in oysters unless you have a good equipment. Why, a first-class oyster-boat, with up-to-date engine and machinery, is worth fourteen or fifteen thousand dollars. And then there's your scows and floats and motor-boats, and a lot of other things.

Why, a pair of dredges alone is worth \$150. And then after you do get a bed and plant it, you've got to wait three years before your oysters is big enough to ketch. Why, a fellow's got to have nearly enough money to retire on before he can make a start in the oyster business."

Alec looked very sober. "I believe there isn't any use of a fellow like me trying to become an oyster-planter," he thought. "I couldn't earn and save fifteen thousand dollars—ever."

"Think you'd like to be an oysterman?" asked Captain Bagley, looking searchingly at Alec.

"I don't know," said Alec. "I've got to do something, and I think I like oystering as much as anything I ever saw. But I want to get to the top if I become one."

"Well, the best way to get to the top is to start at the bottom—and work. The oyster shippers are always on the watch for bright young fellows that know the business and ain't afraid of work. Many a fellow has worked himself up to a partnership in an oyster firm that started just where you are—at the bottom."

By this time the *Bertha B* was nearing the oyster grounds. Alec got into the captain's oilskins again and was in his place on deck when the captain gave the word to let go the dredges.

This time Alec needed no instructions. He took hold like an old-timer. He was working with Sailor Bishop again, and once more he set himself to try to learn his companion's trick of culling

oysters fast. He grew more and more expert as the hours passed, and was soon able to keep pace with Joe and Dick, neither of whom was very quick; but to save him, Alec could not fill his baskets as fast as Bishop filled his. One reason for Bishop's speed, Alec found, lay in the sailor's huge hands. His fingers were the longest Alec had ever seen. The sailor often picked up three or four oysters at a time. And long practice had made him so expert that he could often detect a rattler without having to tap it with his hammer.

In a little while the novelty of the work wore off, but still Alec found plenty to interest him. His work in biology had given him a keen interest in all forms of life. The marine life about him was new, and Alec found continual delight in the contents of the dredges. Now a crab was brought up. Again some curious fish like a "toady," as ugly and venomous in appearance as Shakespeare's land toad, came flopping on the deck; but apparently it had no redeeming jewel in its head, for the sailors treated it with supreme contempt. Sometimes a king-crab was caught in the dredge—a curious, brown, horseshoe-shaped creature, with a long, straight tail of shell. And often there came tumbling aboard oyster drills, which looked like tiny conchs. There were quantities of sponge-like plant growths and red moss, like scarlet seaweed. And once there was real excitement as a huge turtle came flopping aboard. It must have been two feet in diameter, with clusters of barnacles on its shell as

big as one's fist, and a terrible beak that could take a finger off at a single snap.

"Now we'll have some turtle soup," said Sailor Bishop, as he turned the creature on its back and shoved it out of the way.

Before Alec knew it, the day's work was done, and the *Bertha B* was on her homeward way. In an old dead tree that stood by itself in the salt meadow Alec saw what looked like a mass of drift-wood; but the captain said it was an osprey's nest. Alec studied the distant nest through a telescope the captain lent him. It was a huge thing, three or four feet in diameter, made of old sticks. Later still Alec saw an osprey soaring not far astern of the *Bertha B*. Even as he watched it, the huge bird suddenly tilted downward and fell like a plummet into the water. A moment later it rose from the waves, with a glistening fish in its talons. On every hand there seemed to be new and interesting things to see.

The next day Alec had his first touch of seasickness. The wind was blowing half a gale when the *Bertha B* reached the oyster grounds, and the little boat jumped about in a way that at first alarmed Alec considerably. But when he saw that the sailors regarded the movement of the ship as a matter of course, he forgot his fear. Soon he forgot almost everything else; for his head began to ache, and a feeling of nausea came over him. He had never felt worse in his life. He thought he was going to die but did not seem to care.

"What's the matter?" asked Sailor Bishop. "Getting sick? You look pretty pale."

"I won't get sick if I can help it," said Alec to himself. "I'm going to fight this thing off."

His head seemed to be in a whirl, and he was afraid to try to stand up, lest he be pitched overboard. So he knelt on the deck, braced himself against the movement of the ship, and kept working. Whenever he could, he straightened up and drew in a deep breath of the fresh, crisp air. The air made him feel better. He tried to think about his work and not about himself. And after a time he felt noticeably better. Before the day was past the feeling of nausea had left him entirely, and never thereafter did he suffer from seasickness.

Being a Friday, it was pay-day, though Alec did not know it. When the *Bertha B* again lay at her pier at the end of the day, the crew did not hurry ashore as they had done every other day, though the captain left the boat the instant she was fast. Presently he returned with a roll of bills in his hand. He counted out each man's pay and handed the money around. Then the sailors left fast enough. When they were gone, the captain turned to Alec.

"How much do you think I ought to pay you?" he asked.

"I don't know," said Alec. "I didn't make any bargain with you. I don't know what I ought to get."

"I'm going to give you ten dollars," said the

captain. "You worked only four days. Next week, if you put in a full week, I'll give you more. The deck-hands on this boat get \$17.50 a week, but I gave them \$20 this week because they did a mighty good week's work. You'll get just as much as you make yourself worth. Captain Rumford pays his men well. If you keep on as good as you've begun, you'll soon be getting as much as any of the other hands."

"Thank you," Alec replied. "I'll try. Oh! I'll do my best, for I need the money so badly. It's going to take me a good many weeks to earn all I need." And he went over to the stove and sat down on a chair, bowing his head in his hands.

"I wish that Hawley would come get this," muttered Captain Bagley to himself, as he counted out the money that was due the discharged sailor and laid it in his own bunk.

His own money he made into a little roll, including with the greenbacks a check that had come to him by mail. Then he put a little rubber band around the roll. After a second's hesitation he wrapped Hawley's money about his own, added another rubber band, and dropping the roll in his bunk, started to change from his working garb to his street clothes.

"The deuce!" he said suddenly. "I forgot to ask Captain Rumford about them dredges. I hope he ain't started for home yet."

Captain Bagley darted out of the cabin like a streak of lightning, and ran across the pier to the

office. Zipp was there and he told Captain Bagley that Captain Rumford had just left. Captain Bagley could catch him before he got to his automobile. The lithe skipper flew down the stairs and raced up the shipping platform. He overtook the shipper, and a long conversation followed. On his way back to his boat, Captain Bagley was called into a ship-chandler's, and a full half hour elapsed before he got back. To his surprise there was not a soul aboard. Alec had disappeared. The money the captain had left in his bunk was also gone.

CHAPTER IX

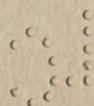
UNDER A CLOUD

FOR a moment the captain stared blankly into his bunk. Then, "The little rip!" he cried. "I never would have believed it of him. Seemed such a nice, clean kid, too."

Energetic in all things, the captain began to fire up. His anger mounted. If he could have laid his hands on Alec just then, he probably would first have trounced him roundly and explained afterward. But not having Alec to chastise, he began to swear at him. Presently the captain cooled off, as he always did, and his better nature came to the top.

"Poor kid," he muttered. "He was just worried sick about his dad's tombstone. He wouldn't do such a thing under ordinary circumstances. Don't be too hard on him, Bagley. And remember, he's your old pal's nephew."

Before long the captain decided he would say nothing about the matter and pocket his loss. Then that same sense of loyalty to his friends made him decide that he ought to tell Captain Rumford. It would never do for the shipper to have a thief



around without knowing it. Of course Alec wouldn't be around, Captain Bagley realized, for he would discharge him the instant he set eyes on him.

"I'll tell the captain right away," he said to himself. "He'll be home by this time."

Captain Bagley hurried to the office and let himself in with his key. He got the shipper on the telephone almost immediately. Despite his fiery nature, Captain Bagley possessed great discretion. "Cap'n Rumford," he said, "there's been some crooked work going on down here. I don't want to talk about it over the 'phone, but I'd like to tell you about it."

"I'll be right down," telephoned the shipper. "I'm almost through supper, and you can look for me as soon as I can get there."

Captain Bagley sat down to wait for the shipper. The latter lived in a village only a few miles distant, and his motor-car carried him back to the office in no time.

"What's wrong, Bagley?" he said anxiously, as he came into the office.

"Nothing to worry about, Cap'n, but something that'll disappoint you. I notice that you took a great fancy to the new hand."

"Yes. He's a fine lad. He's going to make a good man."

"Well, I am sorry to tell you he's skipped with my week's pay and the money that was due Hawley."

Captain Rumford's face turned black as a thunder-cloud. "Have you any notion where he skipped to? We must catch him, even if it costs more than he took. I try to treat my men right, but I'll be hanged if I'll let anybody rob me." The shipper was now as angry as his oyster captain had been a little while previously.

"I haven't any idea where he went."

"How did it happen? How did he get hold of your roll?"

"Why, him and me was the only two aboard the *Bertha B*, and I laid my money in my bunk while I was changing my clothes. Then I happened to think about them dredges, and I bolted out to ketch you, without a thought about the money being there. When I got back both the kid and the money was gone."

"Looks like a plain enough case," said the shipper. "Do you know of any reason why he should steal? He looked as honest as sunlight."

"Yes. There was a very particular reason. He's been worrying about money ever since he got here. Showed me a letter he got about his father's tombstone. Seems he paid a marble man to put a stone on his father's grave. Gave him every cent he had, but that was only half the price. The man agreed to put the stone up and wait for the balance of his money until the lad could earn it. But he played the kid dirt. Wrote him he wouldn't put no stone up until he had every cent. The kid seems to have thought everything of his dad, and it wor-

ried him sick. The last thing I heard him say was that it would take him an awful long time to get that money earned."

"It's a plain case, I guess. That explains why he didn't give me my quarter," and the shipper told Captain Bagley of his giving Alec a dollar to get a meal and of Alec's failure to return the change.

"What are you going to do about it, Cap'n?" inquired Skipper Bagley. "It ain't fair not to ——"

At that instant a footstep was heard on the stairs. The door opened, and in walked Alec.

"So you thought better of it, did you?" said Captain Bagley.

Alec looked puzzled. "Thought better of what?" he asked.

"Now don't try any bluffs on us," said the shipper tartly. "Be honest and admit you stole the money and we may overlook it. We understand that you were in trouble and needed the money badly."

Alec was almost dumb with astonishment. "Admit that I stole the money!" he cried. "I don't understand what you are talking about. I never stole a cent from anybody."

"Come, come!" said Captain Rumford sharply. "Don't make the matter worse by lying about it."

Alec's eyes blazed. "See here," he said angrily. "I don't care if you are the biggest oyster shipper in Bivalve. You shall not call me a liar. I didn't take your money or anybody else's. You've got to

take that back. I won't stand it. I'm not a thief and I'm not a liar."

Captain Rumford sat sharp up in his chair and fastened his keenest glance on Alec's face. His look seemed to bore right through the lad. But Alec never flinched. He looked straight into the captain's eyes until the shipper shifted his gaze to Bagley.

"Cap'n," said the oyster shipper, "if that lad's a liar, he's the nerviest one I ever met with. He's the first man that ever lied to me and looked me square in the eye afterward."

"See here," said Alec, trembling with anger. "I demand an explanation. I tell you I am neither a liar nor a thief; and you have no right to call me one."

"Well, that's a simple matter," said the shipper. "Captain Bagley left you alone in the cabin of his boat with his pay-roll, or what was left of it. When he came back, you had gone and the cash had disappeared. The captain says you had very great need of money and were worrying about how you could get it, when he left the boat. Have you any explanation to make?"

"I can explain everything," said Alec. "It's true I need money. Oh, sir, you don't know how badly I need it! My father did everything in the world for me, sir, and it will take me weeks and weeks to earn even a little tombstone to mark his grave with."

Alec paused to try to get command of his voice.

Tears were streaming down his cheeks. "I loved my father with all my heart," he continued. "Do you think I would disgrace him by being dishonest? He always taught me to be honest and honorable above all things, sir. Do you think I would do the one thing that would hurt my father if he were alive?"

Once more Alec wiped his eyes as he paused. Then, choking back a sob, he continued: "I did not take the money, sir. I never knew until this minute that it was in the captain's bunk. I was so troubled I couldn't think of anything but how long it was going to take me to earn that gravestone. When Captain Bagley ran out, he startled me. I remembered I owed you a dollar, and I came straight here to pay you, sir. I meant to give you your change the other day, but you were in the office here when I got back from the hotel and I had to get right to work. Then I forgot it until after you went home. Here is the dollar now, sir, and I'm much obliged to you for the loan."

"Was anybody here when you came to pay me the dollar?" asked the shipper, again eyeing Alec sharply.

"Yes, sir. Zipp was here."

"Did you say anything to him?"

"Yes, sir. I asked for you, and he said you had just left and that Captain Bagley had run after you. I didn't want to interrupt any talk between you and Captain Bagley, so I did not try to overtake you, sir."

The oyster shipper turned in his seat and picked up his telephone. "345 R," he said to the operator.

A moment later he said, "That you, Zipp?" Then, after a pause, "Did the new deck-hand, Alec Cunningham, come to the office after I left?" Again there was a pause. "He did, eh? Did he say anything to you?"

Alec held his breath while Zipp answered. "Asked for me, did he?" repeated the captain. "And you told him I had gone and Captain Bagley had run after me."

The shipper hung up his receiver and turned to Alec. "Well, that story is straight enough. Where have you been the rest of the time? And what did you do?"

"I walked up the shipping platform and looked into several cars that were being loaded. Then I went to the post-office and asked if there was a letter for me and got a stamped envelope and a money-order for \$8.75 to send to that tombstone man. Then I started back to the *Bertha B.* I saw the office door was still open, when I passed, and I came up to see if I could get an old envelope or a piece of paper to write on. Here's the envelope and the money-order, sir."

"Very good," said the shipper. "But still you have not offered any proof that you didn't take the money. If you didn't take it, who did? You were the only person in the boat after Captain Bagley came ashore. How can you get around that?"

"And you have no proof that I did," replied

Alec, his indignation rising again. "You don't even try to be fair. The *Bertha B* was at her pier for more than half an hour without a soul on watch. A dozen men might have gone into her cabin in that time. You've got to prove that nobody was aboard of her before you've any right to accuse me of stealing the money."

"Don't tell me what I've a right to do," said the shipper, a little nettled. "Leave the room and don't say a word about this to anybody."

CHAPTER X

ALEC'S DECISION

BITTER, indeed, were Alec's thoughts as he stumbled down the office stairs. Blinding tears stood in his eyes. His heart seemed dead within him. He felt sick all over—sick and indignant. Ever since he was a tiny child his father had taught him that his honor and his good name were to be treasured above all things. Never before had anybody even suspected him of dishonesty. Now he was worse than suspected. He was both accused and practically condemned. For it was perfectly evident to Alec that the oyster shipper still doubted him.

As Alec turned the situation over in his mind, his indignation grew fiercer and fiercer. He told himself that Captain Bagley had no right to leave the money in the ship's cabin, as he did; and Alec was right. He told himself that Captain Bagley should have told him to guard the money, when he rushed off after the shipper; and again Alec was right.

"I was free to come and go," said Alec to himself, "and Captain Bagley had no right to assume that I would stay on the *Bertha B* all the time,

when there is so much that is interesting to see and learn. Why, anybody can walk into any of these boats at any time, and Captain Bagley knows that as well as I do. And if somebody dishonest came aboard and nobody was in the cabin and some money was lying loose, what could the captain expect? It wasn't fair for him to do what he did. It wasn't fair. He never said a word to me about his money and now he holds me responsible for its loss. It isn't fair! It isn't fair!"

In deep distress Alec walked up and down under the pier shed. He saw nothing, heard nothing, felt nothing, but his own distress.

"And I was trying so hard to be helpful and to show my appreciation of Captain Bagley's kindness," said Alec to himself. "Kindness! Bah! Let him keep his kindness for others. What I want is justice. I'll leave him and his old boat and go where people will treat me fair. That's all the kindness I want—just a square deal."

In his bitterness Alec was himself unjust. With the inexperience of youth, he reasoned that because he had been questioned as to his honesty he had necessarily been condemned. He failed to see that his employers owed it to him as well as to themselves and all the other oystermen to find out who was the thief. Necessarily they had to question Alec first, for circumstances certainly did point to him.

The more he brooded over the matter, the more indignant he felt. "I won't stay here another minute," he said. "I won't have anything to do

with men who have so little fairness." And he headed for the *Bertha B* to get his valise and the few poor possessions in it. But half-way down the pier he stopped abruptly. A new idea popped into his head. "If you go aboard the *Bertha B* and take your things, and anything else should disappear, they'll say you stole the thing and ran away."

He pondered over the situation. "Run away!" he muttered. "That's just what you were about to do. An honest man doesn't run away when he's under fire. He stays and fights. Why, if I had run away, they'd never have doubted that I was the thief. Gee! I'm glad I thought in time." And Alec fairly shivered at the thought of what would have happened had he foolishly gone away.

"I'll fight," he muttered. "That's what I'll do. I'll show them I'm as honest and square and smart and able as any man that ever walked these planks. That's what I'll do. I'll be an oysterman, too. That's settled. I'll be a planter and shipper, too. I'll be just as big a man at Bivalve as Captain Rumford or anybody else. I'll show them what Alec Cunningham's got in him. I'll work and work and work and study and study and save my money, and some day I'll have the finest oyster-boat that sails out of this port. And I'll call her *Old Honesty*, too. And she won't be any old-fashioned sailing boat done over. She'll be an up-to-date oyster-boat, scientifically made. Captain Rumford will have to scrap his whole fleet when my new boat

gets to work. He'll find it was a costly thing to call me a thief, that's what he will."

Now all faintness of heart had gone from Alec. The feeling of sickness had left him. He was all aglow with determination and purpose. He felt that the die was cast. He had made up his mind. He felt as strong as Atlas, as indomitable as Jupiter. In his vision he saw the delectable goal, but he could not see the hard and painful path that led up to it.

Nor was all this as foolish as it might seem to many an older head. Dreams are the thing that accomplishments are made of—dreams and work. Often the faith and enthusiasm of youth are more effective than the coldly reasoned acts of maturity. And now, though eventual success was no whit nearer than it had been a few moments previously, Alec felt immensely better in mind. He had come to a decision. He had mapped his course. He meant to keep his job, if that were at all possible, and fight. And he meant to fight until he got to the top.

Now his footstep was no longer stumbling. He walked with a firm tread. As he strode up and down the pier, his heart was beating the call to arms.

Suddenly he stopped in his tracks. On the adjoining pier was Hawley. Although it was now dark, Alec could see him plainly in the glow of the pier shed's lights. There could be no mistake as to the man's identity. Where he had come from,

Alec had no idea; nor had he a much clearer idea of where the man was going, for Hawley, plainly intoxicated, was reeling about uncertainly. And he was dangerously near to the edge of the pier. He was on the ferry pier, where the tugboat from across the river landed its passengers; and no oyster-boat had tied up at the end of this pier. Beyond its edge was only deep, dark, cold, swirling water.

At sight of Hawley, a feeling of hatred leaped into Alec's heart. He wanted to rush over to the pier and attack this man who had tried to kill him.

Suddenly Alec's heart stood still. The drunken sailor, reeling at the very edge of the pier, stumbled over a coil of rope, and fell backward over the string-piece, bellowing like a mad bull. Then there was a splash and silence.

For a single instant Alec stood as though rooted to the floor. For one second he exulted at the disaster that had overtaken his enemy. Then a shudder ran over him as he realized that in thought, at least, he was a murderer, and that was a million times worse than being a thief.

"Help! Help!" he cried at the top of his voice. "Man overboard at the ferry landing!"

At the same time he rushed to the end of the pier and looked right and left for a trace of the missing sailor. In the darkness he could see only inky water.

Now he heard men running on the plank floor. "A light!" he cried. "Bring a light!"

In a moment the watchman was beside Alec with his lantern. Behind him came running the shipper and Captain Bagley. Alec seized the lantern and threw himself prone on the wharf. He held the light over the string-piece, while he looked right and left into the muddy water.

"Know who it was?" asked Captain Bagley, as he peered over Alec's shoulder.

"Hawley—drunk," said Alec briefly.

"The deuce!" exclaimed the skipper. "That's the end of him. He can't swim."

There was a swirl in the water a little way out from the pier. An arm and a shoulder writhed into view, then sank. Like a flash Alec was on his feet. He dropped the lantern on the pier, tore off his coat, and plunged headlong toward the swirl in the water.

In a moment his head popped up. "A rope!" he cried, then sank beneath the tide. The water began to foam and bubble. For an instant the struggling men came into view. An arm was around Alec's neck and another about his body. The men on the pier saw that he was struggling frantically in the clutch of the drowning sailor. The fight was terrific. Hawley clung to the lad with the strength of a giant, choking and strangling him. Alec worked frantically to get his arms free, treading water desperately to keep his head up. He swallowed quantities of muddy, salt water. Under the awful pressure about his neck, his eyes seemed to be fairly bulging from his head. Swiftly

the tide swept the struggling men toward the next pier, where a row of oyster-boats lay fast. If the water carried them under the boats it meant the end of Alec and Hawley.

Captain Bagley raced around to the adjoining pier and out on a boat. Then he darted over the knighthead and lowered himself on the chains until he was level with the water.

"Bring that light, quick!" he cried.

The aged watchman hobbled to him as fast as he was able. Captain Rumford picked up the coil of rope, carried it swiftly aboard the boat, and made ready for a cast.

The tide swept the struggling sailors nearer. With all his power Alec was trying to free himself from the grip that was strangling him. His strength was almost gone. He could no longer see anything. His head was pounding. His brain seemed to swirl. But he tried desperately to keep his wits. He knew that unless he got free it would all be over in another moment. Now he wrenched his arms loose. Down under the tide sank the struggling men again, churning the water to foam in their struggles.

"Oh God!" cried Captain Bagley. "If only I could swim."

Above him the watchman steadied the light, while the shipper stood tense, the looped end of the hawser in his hand, ready to make his cast.

Down, down, down went the fighting sailors. But now Alec had his arms loose. With his last

ounce of strength he shoved his hand over the arm that was strangling him and gripped the sailor by the nose. With his other hand he dealt him as savage a blow as he could in the pit of his stomach. The effect was magical. The sailor loosened his strangle hold and doubled up like a jack-knife. Alec grasped the man by the hair, and with all the strength left in him, struggled upward. His head popped out of water not ten feet from Skipper Bagley. The sailor, now unconscious, came to the surface. Alec could do no more. He turned on his back and tried to float. It seemed to him that he could not even wriggle his fingers. He was on the verge of unconsciousness himself. Yet he kept tight hold of Hawley's hair.

Then a voice that seemed to be almost overhead put new life in him. "Catch this rope," it said, "and slip it under your arms."

There was a splash in the water and the rope fell across his very fingers. Mechanically he grasped it. But he could not get it around his body. He slipped his free arm through the noose. Gently the rope tightened and he moved ahead through the water, the unconscious sailor trailing behind him. In a second Captain Bagley had him by the coat collar. Then the noose was slipped under both of Alec's arms.

"Easy now," cried the skipper, as he held himself on the chains with his legs, keeping Hawley's head above water with one hand, while he steadied Alec with the other. Strong arms pulled on the rope,

and in a moment Alec was safe. Then the rope was made fast about Hawley, and shortly his prostrate form lay on the deck.

Captain Bagley tore off his own coat and wrapped it around Alec. "Run to the *Bertha B*," he said, "and get them wet things off. Stir up the fire and get something hot inside you."

"In a m-m-m-minute," said Alec, his teeth chattering. "We've g-g-got to save Hawley first."

"You get out of this," thundered the oyster shipper. "We'll take care of Hawley."

He grabbed the unconscious sailor by the heels and lifted him straight up. Captain Bagley drew down the man's tongue with his handkerchief. Water gushed from the sailor's open mouth. The watchman squeezed the man's ribs to try to press out more. Then they laid him on his back and began to pump his arms up and down.

"That's too fast," cried Alec, who was making haste slowly and watching them from the pier. "Fifteen times a minute is right, and you ought to press in his ribs when you pull down his arms."

"You get aboard the *Bertha B*," shouted Captain Bagley, "or I'll heave you overboard again."

"We've got to get him out of this cold air," said the shipper, for in a few minutes Hawley began to breathe. "Let's take him into the cabin of this boat."

The watchman led the way with his lantern, while the two captains carried the bulky form of the sailor down the companionway.

“Get his clothes off,” said Captain Rumford.

Captain Bagley began to strip off the wet garments. Somehow Hawley's pocket-knife had worked up above his belt, taking the trousers' pocket with it. Captain Bagley could not loosen the belt buckle. He drew his own knife and started to cut off the offending pocket. The sailor's knife came tumbling out. After it slipped a tiny roll of round, green paper with a rubber band about it. For an instant Captain Bagley seemed paralyzed. Then he grabbed the roll and tore off the band. A number of wet greenbacks unrolled under his trembling fingers. Inside of them was another roll of bills, also fastened with a rubber band. Inside of all was a check. The ink on it had run, but the captain was still able to read the name on the check. The check was payable to Captain Christopher Bagley.

CHAPTER XI

A WIRELESS TELEPHONE

FOR a moment the oyster skipper was like one struck dumb. Then his usual explosive nature asserted itself.

"That's where my money went," he burst out, holding up the severed pocket. He leaped to his feet. "You look after this scoundrel and don't let him get away. I'll go take care of the lad. We gave him a rough deal."

Captain Bagley was out of the cabin and aboard the *Bertha B* in no time. He found Alec shivering by the fire. Without a word the skipper helped him peel off the last of his wet garments, and once more he set to rubbing Alec with a rough towel. As he rubbed, he talked.

"Lad," he said, "we done you wrong. The missing money was in Hawley's pocket."

Alec was too much astonished for words. The skipper mistook his silence. "I want you to let bygones be bygones. Will you?" He held out his hand.

Alec grasped it warmly. "It's all right," he said, "and we'll forget it. But I was pretty much cut up for a time. I realize now how bad things looked." Then, after a moment Alec asked, "How

is Hawley? Thank God! I went after him. Now you *know* I'm honest."

"We know more. We know you're a mighty brave lad. There ain't many fellows around here who would take a chance like that to save a fellow who had tried to murder them."

"I don't seem to get warm," said Alec.

The captain rubbed him more briskly than ever. Still Alec remained chilly.

"Guess you'd better put on warm clothes and get right into your bunk," said the skipper, poking up the fire and shoving the coffee-pot over the warmest griddle.

Alec pulled on some clothes, then wrapped himself in a reefing-jacket and lay down on his bunk, drawing some heavy quilts over him. Still he shivered. The captain remained with him, dosing him from time to time during the night with hot drinks that he brewed on the stove. But this time nature was to take her toll. Morning found Alec with a high fever.

The instant Captain Bagley was satisfied that Alec was going to be ill, he telephoned Captain Rumford. Bivalve, which was nothing but a shipping port with practically no residences, possessed no physician. Captain Rumford said he would bring his family doctor down with him; and before many hours passed the physician stood by Alec's bedside.

"You'll have to take mighty good care of this lad if he is to escape having pneumonia," said the

physician, after testing Alec's pulse and temperature. "It's a wonder the shock didn't kill him outright."

"If his condition is so serious as that," said the shipper, "he ought to be in a good home where he can have proper care."

"He should. If you were willing to take a deck-hand into your house, Captain, you would be doing an act of real charity."

"Not charity," said the phlegmatic shipper slowly. "Justice. We owe a lot to that lad."

That was all Alec ever heard Captain Rumford say by way of explanation or apology. He was a man who often found it difficult to express himself in words; but he had other ways of expressing himself, as Alec was soon to learn. Even the little he had said was much for him to utter. But little as it was, Alec had heard the statement, and it made him feel a great deal better than any of the doctor's medicines did.

For though he was speedily whisked away to the shipper's home, where he had the best of care, his illness was severe. Chills and high fever seized him alternately. So severe had been the shock of the two exposures that his system could not seem to rally and throw off the heavy cold that had seized upon him. Ten days passed before Alec was pronounced fit by the doctor to take his place on the deck of the *Bertha B*.

Irksome enough those ten days seemed to Alec; yet they were probably as profitable a ten-day

period as he ever spent in his life. For not a day passed that Captain Rumford did not spend considerable time in the sick-room. In those ten days Captain Rumford came to know Alec better than he would ordinarily have known him in a year.

"Alec," he said one day, "did you know that the man who fell overboard was Hawley—that is, did you know it before you went over after him?"

"Yes, sir," said Alec.

"You were morally certain he had tried to kill you, and yet you went overboard after him?"

"Yes, sir."

"Why did you do it?"

"Because he *had* tried to kill me."

"I don't understand what you mean."

"I mean—I mean," stammered Alec, with burning cheeks and downcast eyes, "that for an instant I was glad he had fallen overboard. Then the thought came to me that in my mind, at least, I was a murderer, and that was a million times worse than being the thief you believed me to be. I couldn't stand it, sir. The thought drove me wild and I had only one idea—to save Hawley at any price."

Captain Rumford stared at Alec fixedly. Here was a degree of fineness he had never before encountered in a human being. "He's true as steel," he thought to himself. Aloud he said merely, "I see," and paused in thought.

"What became of Hawley?" asked Alec suddenly.

"Oh! He's all right. Bagley was for having

him put in prison at first. Then he cooled down, gave the fellow a deuce of a blowing up, and ended by finding him a job—just like the captain. Looks as though the fellow is trying to brace up, too. He'd be a good oysterman if he'd stay sober. By the way, have you made up your mind what you are going to do with yourself?"

"Yes, sir," said Alec emphatically. "I'm going to be an oysterman." But he did not tell Captain Rumford when he had come to that decision or why.

"Do you have any definite plan in mind?"

"No, sir. I've got to learn more about the oyster business first. But I'm going to know everything there is to know. And I'm going to have an up-to-date outfit. No old done-over schooners for me. I'm going to have an oyster-boat that *is* an oyster-boat."

The captain smiled ever so faintly. "What is it going to be like?" he inquired.

"Well, it will be bigger and higher and faster and have more hold room than any oyster-boat now in the fleet. And it will be equipped with wireless, sir."

The lurking smile vanished from the captain's face. "Where did you get those ideas?" he demanded.

"Partly from hearing others talk and partly from my own observation."

"If you ever do," said the captain, "I reckon you'll make a lot of ship owners scrap their boats. They can't compete with an outfit like that. How

are you expecting to get the money for a boat like that? Don't you know it will cost a lot more than the present type of boat, and goodness knows that costs enough."

"The minute I finish paying for my father's gravestone, sir, I'm going to begin saving for that boat. If these ordinary workers around here earn a thousand to twelve hundred dollars a year, working ten or twelve hours a day, as I understand they do, I can earn a lot more working sixteen hours, can't I? And I can save most of what I earn."

"So that's your plan," observed the shipper, without comment. Then he thrust his hand into his breast pocket and drew forth a letter. "Your mention of your father's gravestone reminds me that I have a letter for you." And he handed the envelope to Alec.

"You have made a mistake," said Alec. "This letter is addressed to you."

"I know. But it is really for you."

In wonderment Alec opened and read the letter. Moisture came in his eyes. "Oh, sir, how can I ever thank you?" he cried.

The letter was from the Central City monument dealer in reply to a sharp note from the shipper. It said the stone had been set up and that the dealer would be glad to have the remainder due as soon as Alec could forward it. Alec did not know it, but the captain had practically guaranteed the payment of that money. It was his method of making amends.

When Alec grew a little stronger and could get about a little, but was still far from able to go aboard ship, he began to grow very restless. Finally he asked if he might have his wireless outfit. The shipper got it for him. The outfit interested everybody in the household, especially the shipper's daughter Elsa, who was one year younger than Alec. Following his instructions, she made a single-wire aerial between a near-by tree and the window, brought the lead-in wire into the room through an insulating tube, and ran the wire round the edge of the room to a table beside Alec's bed. Then she ran a ground-wire to a water pipe and helped Alec wire up his outfit.

Necessarily this was of the simplest possible sort. There was an old Ford spark-coil, half a dozen dry cells, a spark-gap, a transmitting condenser, a helix, a transformer, a crystal detector, headpiece, and key. All these were of the simplest and cheapest sort. Most of them Alec had made himself; and though they did not look so nice as the bright, shiny instruments to be bought of manufacturers, they answered the purpose quite as well. As Alec and Elsa wired the spark-gap to the transformer, the transformer to the condenser, the condenser to the spark-coil, and added the key and the cells, Alec explained how messages were sent in varying wave-lengths, and how it was possible to listen to one message and tune out other messages of different wave-lengths.

"If only I had a little more powerful battery,"

said Alec, "I could talk to my old chums at home. I believe I can easily talk to the big steamers out on the Atlantic, and I'm going to try it. You know one of my chums is Roy Mercer, wireless man of the steamer *Lycoming*. His boat will be coming up the coast from Galveston in a few days and I'm going to try to get into communication with him. Won't he be surprised to find that I am down in New Jersey and in a fair way to be a sailor myself."

Elsa was fascinated by the wireless. When Alec picked up some of the messages that were flying through the air in the evenings, and copied them down for her, she was so excited she could hardly keep her mind on her lessons.

"If only I could understand what it means," she said, as she sat listening from time to time with the receivers strapped to her ears.

"That's easy," smiled Alec. "I can teach you and you'll be able to learn in a few weeks."

"But you won't be here in a few weeks," sighed Elsa, "and besides I want to communicate by wireless right away."

"The only way to do that," said Alec, "is to have a wireless telephone. But I don't have the instruments. They cost more than a wireless telegraph set, too."

"What would you use?" asked Elsa.

"If I just had a good storage battery instead of these dry cells, a V. T. socket and bulb, some B batteries and a telephone block to add to the in-

struments I already have, we could receive wireless telephone messages O. K. And it wouldn't take very much additional equipment for us to be able to send wireless telephone messages. Some day when I have the time and the money, I'm going to make and buy a complete outfit. With that, I can hold a conversation with any one else who has an outfit within range."

"Wouldn't that be wonderful!" cried Elsa. "Just to think of it! If I had an outfit here and you had one on the *Bertha B* we could talk to each other no matter where you were, whether you were tied up at your pier or out on the Bay! It would be wonderful."

When Alec looked at the bright face before him, with the flashing, blue eyes, pink cheeks, red lips, and curly brown hair, he, too, thought it would be wonderful. He also thought it would be worth quite as much as some of the dollars he might earn and save. Very quickly he decided that he could wait a few hours longer than he had expected for his ideal oyster-boat, and put those hours into the making of some wireless telephone sets. Of course they wouldn't look as nice as store goods, but they would be quite as effective; and when he and Elsa were talking to each other through miles of space and over leagues of tumbling water, he knew neither one would remember or care about the looks of their instruments. What they would be concerned about would be instruments that talked. That, he suddenly thought, was just what the shipper wanted

and the *Bertha B's* captain wanted, and everybody else wanted—dependability, whether in men or instruments. It wasn't the varnish on the outside that made a man or a wireless instrument worth while. It was the quality of performance that came out of that man or instrument.

Alec had almost fallen into a day-dream when he was recalled by Elsa's voice. "Dad's crazy about music, you know, and nobody in the family knows one note from another. He promised me a fine piano on my next birthday if I'd learn to play it, but I don't want the old piano. I'm going to ask him to get me a wireless telephone set instead."

"If you get it," said Alec, "I'll make and buy the pieces I need to convert this outfit into a first-class telephone set. Then we'll be fixed. If your father won't buy you the set, then I'll make all the pieces I can for you, and we can manage to buy what is lacking. You know a fellow can make almost everything except the receivers and the battery."

In one respect Elsa was like Captain Bagley. To think was to act. No sooner had she decided to ask for a wireless telephone set than she made her request. She came back with a long face. Her father would none of it.

Alec became thoughtful. "If I just had those few pieces I need to add to this set," he said, "I believe I could make your father change his mind in regard to the matter."

"How?" cried Elsa.

"I believe if he once listened in with a wireless telephone, he'd want one himself."

"Impossible!" cried Elsa. "He's as set as Gibraltar in his ways. Why, it was years before we could get him to install an ordinary telephone, and he wouldn't get a motor-car until years after everybody else here had one. And I know he thinks this wireless set of yours is all nonsense."

"I'd bet a dollar to a doughnut he'd change his mind if I could just get a telephone set while I'm here."

"What is it you need? Tell me again."

"A good storage battery, a V. T. socket and bulb, some B batteries and a telephone block."

"Would a battery from a Ford car answer?"

"That's exactly what I want."

"Well, I have a Ford runabout, you know, and I take care of it myself. Dad kicks about it every time I come in smeared up with grease. But he can't stop me. I'll get that battery charged and uncouple it and bring it up here. And I've got enough money to buy those other things unless they're too awful expensive."

"They don't cost so much," said Alec. "It's the battery that's expensive."

"Tell me again what they were. Wait. Write it down."

Elsa brought a piece of paper and a pencil. Alec wrote down his list. Then he thought the matter over carefully. "Yes," he said, "those are all the pieces I need, though I ought to have a sec-

ond set of receivers. They'd fix us up all right. If you get them, we can hear well, especially if the battery is freshly charged. We'll use them while I'm here, and after I go you can keep them as part of the set I'm going to make for you."

Elsa left the room. Presently Alec heard the purring of her motor-car. Then he sat in silence for a long time. Finally he heard a motor-car drive into the yard. Not long afterward Elsa came into the room, struggling with her Ford battery.

"Had it recharged," she panted, "and got all the things you wanted."

"Then we'll wire them right up," said Alec.

"I'm awful sorry, but I have to attend a rehearsal for our class play. I can't stay now."

Alec wired up the instruments himself. It was early evening, and atmospheric conditions seemed ideal for wireless communication.

"Now we'll see what the outfit will do," said Alec to himself, as he clamped a pair of receivers on his head and threw over his switch.

For a long time he listened and worked, tuning and adjusting his instruments. At first there was a frightful whistling and wailing in his ears. But gradually he tuned it out, eliminating all but the sounds he wished to hear.

"Now I guess I can handle her O. K.," muttered Alec.

Just then a voice came ringing through the air. "This is WJZ broadcasting. We will begin our concert this evening with the sextette from Lucia,

rendered by singers from the Metropolitan Opera Company." Then, after a moment's pause, "Stand by for three minutes."

"Captain Rumford," called Alec loudly.

"Hello! What is it?" came the response from below.

"Won't you come here at once, please?"

Captain Rumford ran up-stairs to Alec's room, thinking something was the matter.

"Please sit down and put this on your head," said Alec.

The captain frowned. "What's this nonsense?" he said sharply. "I thought you were in trouble."

"Please do as I ask," said Alec. "I won't keep you five minutes."

The captain sat down, the frown still on his forehead. The music started. Clear as a bell on a frosty morning came the beautiful melody, now rising, now falling, every word clear and distinct. Captain Rumford's face was a study. Astonishment, incredulity, intense pleasure were reflected on his countenance. He sat as one entranced. Skilfully Alec shifted his tuning instruments, shutting out the occasional blurs and keeping the tone sharp and distinct. The selection ended. Captain Rumford turned toward Alec and started to remove his headpiece.

"Wait," said Alec. "Please sit still."

"The next number on our programme will be Humoresque, as played by Mischa Elman," came the voice in the air,

In another moment the strains of a violin were sounding in the captain's ears. For nearly an hour he sat in silence, listening to the world's most beautiful music, rendered by famous musicians. He was too amazed to speak. He sat there, drinking in the music, the very picture of ecstasy.

"Where's that from?" he demanded, when the announcer said the concert was ended.

"Newark," said Alec.

"Impossible! Why, Newark is more than one hundred miles distant. It can't be."

Alec smiled. "It was Newark just the same," he said. "That was the Newark station of the Westinghouse Manufacturing Company broadcasting."

"What do you mean?"

"Why, they send out stuff broadcast at every hour of the afternoon and evening. It's free for everybody. All you need is a wireless telephone set."

"Do you mean they send out music?"

"They send out everything you can think of—government weather forecasts, marine news, happenings of the day, baseball scores, stories for children, lectures by famous men and women, the finest kind of music, and lots of other stuff. They give a concert every night in the week. And they send their weekly programmes free to anybody that asks for them. And there are many other stations that broadcast, too. There are Pittsburgh and Chicago and Anacostia and ever so many others."

The captain was dumfounded. "Young man!" he said, "What did that outfit cost?"

"Very little," said Alec. "I made most of it myself. Elsa got these few things this afternoon. For a hundred or a hundred and fifty dollars you could get as fine a receiving set as you'd want. A sending set would cost more."

"You can! Alec, will you buy a good set for me and wire it up? I want the best you can get. You can spend as much money as you like, within reason."

"Certainly, sir," said Alec, trying to keep from shouting for very joy. "I'll be only too glad to. I'll write for catalogues at once and order the stuff. And when it comes, I'll install it and teach you and Elsa how to operate it."

"Fine!" sighed the shipper. "At last we are going to have some music in this house!"

CHAPTER XII

ALEC GETS A NEW JOB

LIKE many another wish, that for the two sets of wireless telephones was unexpectedly slow of achievement. The oyster shipper's instruments arrived promptly enough, and Alec installed them and taught Captain Rumford and his family how to manipulate them. But it was a long, long time before Alec's own set was completed. Needing to save every cent possible, Alec bought only such materials as he could not pick up free, and set about constructing his instruments; but it was a slow job.

For now he was once more back on the oyster-boat; and his plan to learn all there was to learn about oystering, and to spend every minute of his waking hours at work, was more than an idle boast. So he was up by four in the morning or soon thereafter, helping the cook. All day he was busy catching oysters. By the time the *Bertha B* was scrubbed off and made fast to her pier, darkness was at hand. Alec's evenings were necessarily very brief, as it was absolutely necessary for him to go to bed early if he was to get up early. The only free time he had was that consumed by the trips to and from the oyster grounds. And even that grew

steadily less, as he took more and more burdens upon his shoulders.

Like most boys of his age, Alec knew considerable about gasoline motors. In fact Alec was fairly skilled in their handling. Often he had helped a neighbor at home clean and repair his motor-car. His high school physics had taught him a great deal about the theory of gas engine operation. And he had many times driven his neighbor's car. Altogether, he was a handy lad to have about where there were gas engines of any sort.

Down in the hold, where the *Bertha's* engine chugged so steadily, the air was always tainted with the sickening fumes of exploded gasoline, and the smell of oil. For hours every day, year in and year out, Joe had sat beside his engine, unrelieved. Never before had the *Bertha B* numbered among her crew any one else who was capable of tending the engine. Now, as Alec, little by little, showed his capacity and won Joe's confidence, he was allowed to handle the big motor. In time, he was permitted, for limited periods, to operate it altogether, while Joe went to deck for a breath of fresh air. Thus Alec learned a great deal about the *Bertha B's* motor in particular and ship motors in general.

As against his capability in some lines, was balanced Alec's utter ignorance in others. He knew nothing whatever about navigation. But he set himself to learn, and the captain, seeing his desire, aided him. He explained the compass to Alec and

showed him how to steer by it so that he could keep a given course, when no landmarks were in sight. He told him how fast the *Bertha B* ordinarily traveled, and what her maximum speed was. He explained the best speeds for dredging, the proper length of chain to use on the dredges at given stages of the tide, showed him the distant landmarks by which he could locate the Rumford oyster grounds when the stakes were missing, taught him how to find his way into the river at night by the range-lights, and how to distinguish East Point Light from Egg Island Light and all the other lights along the Bay. And the captain taught him about the tides, and how to figure them and take advantage of their flow and allow for drift in steering the boat. He also taught Alec how to find his way through a fog, and how to judge the direction and distance of sounds in a fog. These and many other things Captain Bagley explained to his new hand, delighted, as men of accomplishment always are, to find a lad who was really eager to learn.

Day by day Alec grew in knowledge. All that he needed to make his knowledge wisdom was experience. And with every revolution of the sun he was acquiring that. Occasionally the captain let Alec steer the boat while he himself went back in the cabin for a time. Sometimes the engineer asked Alec to run the motor for a few minutes. And often, when they were all on deck culling oysters, and Alec and Bishop had cleaned up their dredgeful, Dick would call across the deck to Alec

and ask if he would look at the roast in the oven, or put a little more water on the beans or stir the potatoes. And Alec would skip inside and execute the commission. So he came to know, not only how to prepare the foods furnished on the *Bertha B*, but also to know which foods sailors like and which they will not eat. In these and a hundred other ways, Alec was daily making good his assertion that he wanted to know all there was to know about the oyster business, and storing away a vast fund of information that would some day be of the greatest value to him.

Necessarily, therefore, the construction of his wireless outfit was delayed. With the ship pitching and rolling, as it usually did in the Bay, it was difficult to do the fine, exacting work required, such as the winding of the variometer he was making, or the fitting of the parts of a large, loose coupler. Yet every available moment went into the work.

Meantime, Alec had gained Captain Bagley's permission to put up his telegraph set on the *Bertha B*. He ran a single-wire aerial from masthead to cabin roof and brought his lead-in wire directly into his bunk. He built a shelf at the foot of his bunk and fastened his instruments on it. His cells he secured in a corner of the bunk itself.

In these narrow quarters where he could hardly sit upright he carried on whatever wireless communications he held. They were brief enough. Yet he listened to many a message speeding through the air, and he particularly liked to "take Cape

May." Never before had Alec been so near a great wireless plant. The station there, only twenty miles from the *Bertha's* pier, sent its powerful messages snapping into Alec's ear as distinctly as though the sending instruments were in the *Bertha's* very cabin.

Best of all were the brief conversations Alec had with Roy Mercer, when the *Lycoming* passed. Every time that steamer went up or down the coast, Roy and Alec got into touch by wireless and told each other what they had been doing. And sometimes Roy was able to talk to Charley Russell, another member of the Camp Brady Wireless Patrol, who had become first a fire patrol and then a ranger in the forests of Pennsylvania, and had saved the state's finest stand of timber by the help of his wireless and the powerful battery his fellows of the Wireless Patrol had purchased for him. Often Alec caught Charley's answers himself, without needing to have Roy relay them to him. It was mighty good to hear from his old comrade back among the Pennsylvania mountains.

At last, however, Alec completed his telephone set. He still lacked a battery, but his keen sense of obligation would not let him buy one until he had entirely wiped out his debt to Captain Rumford. For Alec now regarded his indebtedness for the gravestone as an obligation to the shipper rather than to the marble dealer. Every week Alec turned over to Captain Rumford practically all of his pay. This mounted steadily from the ten dol-

lars earned in his first week to full pay. So the debt was extinguished much sooner than Alec had dreamed it would be.

His next expenditure was for a battery. Once he had secured that, he wired up his telephone set and found it worked well. That night he broke his rule about retiring early. He was talking to Elsa. After that the two conversed for a time in the early evening before the great electrical companies began to broadcast their programmes, so as to be done with the instruments before Captain Rumford appeared to listen to the music. The dream of the captain's life was realized. He had music in his home every night, and an amplifying horn made it audible to all.

Alec, needless to say, became a first-class deck-hand. Not a day passed that he did not learn something new about the oyster business. As he had practically no expenses, his savings grew fast.

Cold weather came. From time to time it was too cold to operate the oyster-boats. Then the fleet lay in port and the shippers worried because they could not fill their orders.

"When I get my boat," said Alec to himself, "nothing but the heaviest ice will prevent her from operating. She will be high enough so the men can work in the hold, and there won't be any likelihood of the oysters freezing."

Truly it is an ill wind that blows nobody good. The cold days, though they brought loss to shippers and sailors alike, were helpful to Alec. When

there was no work for the lad aboard the *Bertha B*, Captain Rumford brought him into the office. The shipper still clung to the old-fashioned business methods he had learned as a boy. He had no clerical help, but tried to keep his accounts and carry on his correspondence in person. Though it was more of a task than he could handle, for a long time he obstinately refused to alter his methods.

One cold day in midwinter, when every boat in the fleet was tied up, Alec noticed that the captain was fairly sweating under the mountain of clerical work that had accumulated. He was writing some letters, which he had later to copy so as to have duplicates; and there were bills to be made out, bills to be paid, accounts to be entered in the books, correspondence to be answered, and a dozen other tasks to be done.

“Won’t you let me help you?” said Alec. “I haven’t done a thing since you brought me into the office but run errands. Any ten-year-old can do that as well as I can. In high school I studied book-keeping, typewriting, commercial correspondence, and a good many other things about business and office work. I’ve had the training. Won’t you let me help you?”

The captain hesitated. In all his life nobody but himself had ever written a business letter for him, or posted an account in his books. He looked at the pile of work heaped up on his desk. Then he looked at the unopened mail Alec had just brought from the post-office,

"You can slit the envelopes," he said, still hesitating. "That would save some time."

Alec had to turn sharp about to hide the smile that he couldn't prevent. Then he whipped out his knife, and in a minute every letter was cut and ready to open. Alec even pulled each letter part way out of its envelope, to facilitate handling.

"Now let me copy that list, while you look over your mail," urged Alec.

"I don't know," said the shipper. "Let me see your handwriting."

Alec wrote the shipper's name and address. His penmanship was a great deal better than the shipper's cramped and hurried chirography.

"Well, you be careful—very careful," said the shipper, reluctantly surrendering his pen to Alec.

Alec's task was purely mechanical. He copied the list faster and more legibly than the captain had done. When he completed it, the captain was addressing shipping tags. "Let me do that, while you do something more important," urged Alec.

"Be careful. Be very careful," warned the shipper.

When the tags were finished, and Captain Rumford found that not a single mistake had been made, he gave Alec another task. So the two worked busily all the morning long. Before either was aware of it, noon had arrived.

"By George!" cried the shipper, with sparkling eyes. "There's a whole day's work done and it's only dinner time. We'll be able to make a big

hole in this pile this afternoon," and he pointed to the accumulated work awaiting attention at one end of his desk.

The cold spell continued for several days, and in that time Captain Rumford and Alec cleaned up every one of the accumulated tasks; the captain got his books posted, and even got a little ahead with some routine work. The captain felt as though a mountain had been lifted from his shoulders. Alec realized that another opportunity had come his way. He had gained an insight into the clerical end of oystering. He didn't know whether other offices were run like Captain Rumford's or not; but he did understand that in this particular office, at least, there was room for great improvement. If only the captain would change his methods, he could still do his work single-handed. And with the cost of clerk hire so high, that was a thing worth accomplishing. In his own mind Alec pictured the office as he would conduct it if it were his. He thought over all the time-saving devices he could employ. And he decided that he could do as much work as the captain did in about half the time it took the shipper. That was not because Alec considered himself a superior clerk, but because he knew how to use modern clerical devices and appreciated their value.

"Captain Rumford," he said, when he had turned the matter over well in his mind, "I notice that you write out your shipping tags by hand day after day, and that it takes quite a little time.

Don't you have regular customers that you ship to year after year?"

"Why, lad, I've got customers I've shipped to for twenty years," said the captain proudly.

"And in all those twenty years I suppose you've addressed all your tags by hand?"

"Certainly, certainly."

"Wouldn't you save time, Captain, if you had a rubber stamp made for each old customer? Here's a tag you've addressed to Day and Moore, Scranton, Pennsylvania. Ever since I've been here I have noticed bags of oysters going to them almost daily. So I judge they are old customers."

"Exactly," replied the shipper. "One of my oldest customers."

"If you had a rubber stamp with their name and address on it, you could stamp a tag much faster than you can write it, and the address would be much easier to read. With a stamp for each old customer, hung up with the address of each customer over his particular stamp, you could address a good many tags in a minute. Think how much time you would save."

"Um!" grunted the captain. "Um! I'll think it over. It might work. It might work."

Alec tried hard to keep down the smile that wanted to come. "And, Captain Rumford," he went on, "if only you would get a typewriter, I could write letters for you and make carbon copies or copy them in the copying-press. It wouldn't take one-fourth the time it takes to write your let-

ters by hand, let alone make copies of some of them. Then you'd have copies of everything."

"Um!" said the captain again. "But who'd do the typewriting when you are not here? The *Bertha B* won't always be tied up by cold weather."

"Well," laughed Alec, "I don't suppose I'll always be a deck-hand on the *Bertha B*, for that matter. If you wanted to make a deck-hand into an office hand, I don't know what would prevent you. And I'm sure 'Barkis would be willin'."

"Barkis," said the shipper, straightening up. "Who's he, and what's he got to do with my business, anyway?"

"Oh! He's just a character in a book," said Alec. This time he could not conceal the smile, and he added, "He's just a funny sort of fellow that makes you laugh when you think of him."

"But what's this about his being 'willin'?" What's the connection, anyway?"

"Oh! That was just a phrase of his, that came into my head. What I meant was that I would be willing to change from deck-hand to office hand any time you wanted me to."

Captain Rumford wheeled around toward Alec as though he were about to bite him. "Are you getting tired of catching oysters so soon?" he demanded. "I thought you had some sand."

"Tired!" cried Alec. "I love it. But I don't want to be a deck-hand forever, and I don't intend to be, either. There's so much to learn about the

business that I've got to keep moving, or I'll never learn it."

"So you think you already know all there is to learn on shipboard, do you?" said the captain with cold contempt.

"No, sir. I do not," replied Alec, his cheeks aflame at the captain's words. "But I realize there are so many things to learn that I must be moving on or I'll be an old man before I'm ready to start in the business."

"So you're still determined to be an oysterman?"

"Absolutely."

"That's very good. But if I were you I'd wait a while before I tried to teach old oystermen how to run their business."

"If you think that's the way I feel," cried Alec indignantly, "you are very much mistaken. What I want to do now is to learn all there is to know about oystering. But that doesn't mean I'm not going to learn some of the things oystermen have never done. I don't know what they are, yet, but there are some such things. You don't catch oysters to-day the same way you did when you were young. Then you didn't have gasoline engines, or telephones, or motor-boats, or automobiles. And to-morrow we shall be using lots of things we don't use to-day. I'm going to find out what they are and learn all about them, so I'll be right up-to-date when I become an oyster shipper."

The shipper looked long and hard at Alec. "Why are you so all-fired keen about doing things

in what you call an 'up-to-date way'? Suppose a man doesn't take up with these newfangled notions, he's still an oysterman, isn't he, and he still has his beds and still sells oysters, doesn't he?"

"Yes, for a time," said Alec slowly.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean," said Alec, "that no man and no business can be very much behind the times and remain successful. If a merchant lighted his store with candles instead of electricity, he would not keep his trade very long in these days. Some of the oystermen are still using sails, I notice, while the rest of you are using gasoline. Well, they will eventually be driven out of the oyster business. They have to pay the same wages for hands that you do, and they don't catch more than half as many oysters in the same time. See how that cuts their margin of profit. When they strike a poor season, a lot of them will go broke."

"I reckon you're about right."

"Well, when I become a shipper, I don't intend to go broke. I'm going to stay right up with the leaders. So I want to know all I can learn about oystering—office work as well as navigation. And as for your office work, if you had a typewriter I could answer your letters in the afternoons, after the *Bertha B* gets in. The skipper could put me ashore before he unloads his oysters. Why, I could have your letters pretty well cleaned up before the boat made fast for the night. I could help you quite a lot, sir."

“Um!” grunted the shipper. “I’ll think it over.”

But before the captain came to a decision, Alec had found another task that took every moment of his spare time. The weather turned warm, and the fleet resumed work. The usual activity again prevailed at the pier shed. In the midst of it, old Pete had a paralytic stroke. He could no longer collect shells, and many a shipper found himself with his scows still full of shells when morning came. Captain Rumford was one of them. Alec was quick to see the opportunity. If he could take care of these shells, he would help both his employer and himself, for he could sell the shells when spring came, to the oyster-planters. At once he spoke to Captain Rumford about it.

“If I could get a boat,” he said, “I would guarantee to keep your scows clean.”

“If there was any way you could do it,” said the shipper, “I’d be mighty glad to let you. I’m tired of fooling with these old fellows. It’s a real shell game they work on us.”

“I can do it easily, sir,” pleaded Alec. “I have lots of time after the *Bertha B* reaches her pier.”

“Maybe you could,” said the shipper, still hesitating.

“Of course I could. I might have to work after dark sometimes, but I wouldn’t mind that.”

“We’ll try it,” said the shipper suddenly, “but what are you going to do about a boat?”

“I’ve got enough money saved to buy a boat,”

said Alec, "unless it costs too much. Would you be willing to help me buy it?"

"Certainly."

They found just the boat Alec wanted. It was long, wide, and flat bottomed with square ends and very high sides. It would hold at least fifty bushels of shells when full.

"What do you want such a big boat for?" demanded the shipper.

"Because I'll need it," said Alec. "While I am taking your shells away, I might just as well get some more, too. I'm sure some of the other shippers will give me their shells if I guarantee their removal every day. There's one thing still puzzling me, though. Where am I to dump the shells after I have collected them?"

"I'll fix that," said the shipper. "Old Si Newcomb owns the land along the river below the sheds. It's just the place you want. He'll let you put your shells there if I ask him."

"Thank you," said Alec. "Now I'll take my boat and get your shells."

"I'll ride back with you," said the shipper.

Alec took the sculling oar and shoved off. But when he tried to propel the boat as he had seen men doing, his oar flew out of water and he could not budge his craft.

The shipper laughed. "I thought you might find yourself in trouble. It seems there are still some things an old-timer can teach the young fry. Give me that oar."

He fitted it into place and the boat fairly flew over the water under his skilful strokes. Yet he seemed to be working very little. "Watch that oar," said the shipper. And after a moment, "Watch my wrist."

Alec soon caught the trick of twisting the oar with each stroke, and with a little practice found himself able to propel the boat fairly well. He sculled the craft to the captain's pier and collected his shells. Then he asked the shippers at adjoining piers for their shells, guaranteeing their removal each evening if he could have the shells. Still awkward in the handling of his boat, Alec was slow in finishing his task. When he started for his dumping-ground, the tide had turned and was against him. It was all he could do to force the heavy boat against the swift current.

"I see two improvements I need to make right away," said Alec to himself. "I need lights and I need power. I can buy the lights at once. And when I get a little more money saved, I'll get one of these portable motors to hang over the stern. Then I can work faster and easier."

As soon as he had emptied his shells and made his boat fast, Alec walked over to Port Norris, the nearest town, where he found an acetylene lamp that would answer his purpose. He bought it and some carbide and walked back to Bivalve. He went to his boat, and decided how he would mount the light. Then he started for the *Bertha B.* But first he paused to look at the little pile of shells he

had thrown on the shore. There were only a few bushels and the heap seemed very small indeed.

“ I suppose there aren’t more than thirty cents’ worth altogether,” said Alec to himself, “ but never mind. Great oaks from little acorns grow. Nobody knows how big this shell pile will become, or what will come of the venture. But one thing’s sure. I started at the bottom, and I haven’t gotten far yet, but I’ve climbed one rung of the ladder, anyhow. I’m more than a mere deck-hand. I’m a shell merchant, now,” and Alec laughed heartily at the joke. “ How long will it be before I’m an oyster merchant? ”

CHAPTER XIII

AN UNLOOKED-FOR FRIEND

MUCH sooner than he had ever dreamed would be the case, Alec had an opportunity to become an oyster merchant. But it was a sort of oyster business very different from any he had thought of. It was no trouble at all for Alec to secure the shells of additional shippers, for by this time Alec was favorably known to almost everybody at Bivalve. The story of his rescue of Hawley had drawn attention to him. And his modest demeanor, his cheerful way, and his general spirit of helpfulness, attracted every one who met him.

But more powerful than these influences was the fact that Captain Rumford stood behind him. If the captain said a thing would be done, every man at the oyster piers knew it would be done. And the captain was glad to speak to any fellow shipper whose shells Alec wanted, and guarantee their removal. Alec secured those from neighboring piers, so as to lessen the amount of work he would have to do. Nor was there much difficulty about this. The oyster shippers generally had been so dissatisfied with the uncertain manner of collecting

shells that they were ready to adopt almost any plan which promised real improvement. So Alec speedily found himself with more shells engaged than he really knew how to handle.

Naturally he did not get shells away from the old collectors without gaining their enmity, too. They cursed him when they met him, and some even threatened him. Alec paid little attention to them; but he was too wise to disregard their threats altogether. He had had one experience with an enemy that nearly cost him his life, and he did not propose to be caught napping a second time. His work after dark made it especially easy for any one to harm him who so chose. So Alec went about with both eyes and both ears open.

One night he had finished collecting his shells and had just pulled into his dumping-ground, when a dark form stepped out of the marsh reeds and leaped aboard his boat. Instinctively Alec picked up his oar and prepared to defend himself. When he saw that the man was Hawley, he gripped the oar tighter than ever and made ready for a struggle. His heart began to beat like a pneumatic riveter, but he stood firm, and tried to appear unconcerned.

"Hello, youngster," said the giant sailor, advancing a step toward him. "You're getting a lot of trade, I see."

"Yes. More than I can handle."

"Exactly what I reckoned," replied Hawley.
"Exactly what I reckoned."

Alec wondered why, if the man intended harm to him, he did not attack him at once. "He's just waiting to take me off my guard," he said to himself. Aloud he said, "The oyster business is pretty slack just now, and I can just manage to handle the shells. But I don't know what I would do if the shippers should have a rush of business. I guess I'd have to have help or else quit the *Bertha B.*"

"Exactly what I reckoned," said Hawley. "Exactly what I reckoned. And I come to offer to help you."

Alec nearly tumbled over backward in his astonishment. "I'd like to have your help all right," he said, still eyeing Hawley distrustfully, "but I don't know how I'd pay you."

"Who said anything about pay?" asked Hawley.

"I don't exactly understand what you mean," said Alec. "Of course you'd want pay if you helped me, and, of course, I would expect to pay you. Nobody can afford to work for nothing."

"Exactly what I reckon," said Hawley. "But I've had my pay already. Now I want to earn it."

"I don't understand you."

The big oysterman stepped forward. Alec retreated and raised his oar. "Just stand back, will you?" he said.

"I don't blame you a bit for feelin' that way, seein' as how you never had no reason to trust me," replied Hawley, and he went back to the very bow of the boat. "But I don't mean you no harm, lad.

I come to help you. Jim Hawley ain't no copper-head, even if you do have reason to think so. That wasn't Jim Hawley that chucked you into the river. It was old John Barleycorn. Jim Hawley ain't that sort of a feller. I'm done with John Barleycorn, and I want you to know the real Jim Hawley. I want to help you and it won't cost you a cent."

Alec was too much astonished for words. "It's mighty kind of you," he said, "but I couldn't accept any man's services without paying him for them."

"Come, come, lad, don't be foolish," urged the big sailor. "You need me a whole lot more than you think."

"I'd like to know how."

"Well, I didn't want to tell you this, lad. But I'd feel safer about you if I was around. You know them shell collectors you been gettin' shells away from don't love you any too much, and I don't like to think of you out here alone in the dark. It's been worryin' me."

"Worrying you! Why should you worry about me?"

Big Hawley hung his head. "I ain't had a decent night's sleep since I sobered up," he said. "Cap'n Bagley told me what an old villain I'd been and how fine you was about it, not wantin' me put in jail, and I says to myself, says I, 'If ever you touch another drop of booze, you're a worse scoundrel than even Bagley takes you for; and he thinks you're next to the devil.' So I quit

drinkin'. Ain't touched a drop since, and ain't never goin' to touch another. But that didn't make it right with you. You done the finest thing I ever heard of when you went overboard after me, and I just can't sleep for worryin' how I'm goin' to make it up to you. So you see you've just got to let me help you with them shells."

Hawley's voice had grown husky and his eyes were actually moist before he stopped talking. There was no doubting his sincerity.

Alec threw down his oar and sprang toward him. "Don't you bother about that another minute," he said, holding out his hand, which the sailor pressed warmly. "I'm glad you are no longer angry at me, and that you want to be my friend. And if you really want to help with the shells, I'll be more than glad. But you must let me pay you when I am able."

"Now don't you ever say another word to me about pay," said Hawley, clearing his throat and seizing an oyster shovel. "We'll just consider the matter settled. And I'm much obliged to you. You've done me a mighty good turn. I won't have to worry no more about you out here in the darkness all alone." And he fell to shoveling oysters as fast as he could.

The winter continued open, and the fleet worked with unusual regularity. There were not many days when the weather was too rough for dredging. So the shells accumulated fast. In a little while Alec was able to buy his portable motor. With the

aid of that and with Hawley to assist him, he could care for his shells in a very short time.

"It's almost too bad we don't have more shells," he said to Hawley one day.

"Git 'em!" said the sailor. "You kin. There ain't anybody round here won't give 'em to you if you ask, I reckon."

"I was willing to take old Pete's shells and a few more," said Alec, "but I wouldn't want to put the other collectors out of business."

"What's that to you? They'd put you out of business in a minute if they dared."

"Just the same, it doesn't seem fair. I can't adopt their standards. I've got to stick to my own."

Before many days elapsed, Alec had another opportunity to decide what standards he would follow. One of his competitors came to him and offered to pay him twenty-five cents a basket for the rattlers in his pile of shells.

"You'd be getting eight times as much for the rattlers as you would for the shells, and there'd likely be a basket or two a night in such a big pile of shells. That'd be twenty-five to fifty cents clear velvet every night."

Alec was suspicious. "What do you want them for?" he asked.

"To eat, of course. We can't make enough collecting shells to buy good oysters. These is all right, if we eat 'em soon."

"I'll think it over," said Alec.

When the man was gone, he saw at once the absurdity of the thing. There were only two or three shell collectors to eat the oysters. Only one of them had a family. With Alec's shells they would have access to all the shells in the place. If they could get a basket or two of rattlers from his shells, there must be a number of baskets among all the shells—several bushels in fact. It wouldn't be possible for them to eat all the oysters.

"There's something crooked about this," said Alec. Then he thought of what Hawley had told him of the enmity the other shell collectors had toward him. He decided to ask Hawley about the matter.

"Jim," he said, when he next saw his helper, "old Wallace offered to buy all our rattlers. Said he wanted them to eat. What do you suppose he's up to?"

"Don't know," replied Hawley, frowning, "but you can bet it ain't for no good purpose. Why, that old rip's so crooked he can't even walk straight. You just leave it to me. I'll find out about it."

Three nights later Hawley sought out Alec after the latter had tumbled into his bed on the *Bertha B*. "I know what them rips is up to," he said. "They're openin' their rattlers, treatin' 'em over-night in soda, and sellin' 'em in cans."

"They are!" cried Alec. "Selling them as Maurice River Cove oysters?"

"Surest thing you know."

"If they do much of that, they'll knock the

oyster business into a cocked hat. Anybody that eats one of those things and sees the label 'Maurice River Cove Oysters,' will never want to taste another."

"Exactly what I reckon," said big Jim Hawley.

"I'll tell the shipper about this at once," said Alec.

He glanced at his watch. "Exactly ninety-three," he said. "The captain will be listening to Pittsburgh if he's at home."

He turned to his wireless telephone, threw over his switch, and began to speak. "3ADH calling 3ARM," he called. There was no reply. Again he called.

Then his receivers began to vibrate. "3ARM answering 3ADH," came the message.

"Hello, Captain," he telephoned. "This is Alec. We have found something going on here that I want to tell you about at once. Can you come down?"

"Yes. Are you in a hurry?"

"No. Any time to-night will do."

"I'll come just as soon as this music's done. Good-bye."

An hour later the shipper, the skipper, Alec, and big Hawley were in conference in the cabin of the *Bertha B.* Next day Captain Rumford called a meeting of all the shippers at Bivalve. The conference decided to put an end at once to the existing system of shell collecting.

"We've had enough of this haphazard method,"

said one shipper. "Let us give all our shells to one man and hold him responsible for their proper collection and disposition. Then we shall not have to worry about our scows any longer, and there won't be any of this crooked work going on to ruin the oyster business. It seems to me we couldn't do better than to turn the whole shell business over to that young chap of Cap'n Rumford's. He's a clean, energetic boy, and he'll take care of the shells right. With all our shells to handle, there will be enough in it for him to give his entire time to it."

"And what do you think I'm going to do if you take away the best young fellow I ever had in my employ?" asked Captain Rumford.

"That's your lookout," said his fellow shipper. "The oystermen's association is just as keen to get a good man as you are to keep one."

Captain Rumford himself laid the proposition before Alec. The latter was dumfounded. "Give me twenty-four hours to think it over," he said.

It was a crisis in Alec's life. It was an opportunity and yet it was not the sort of opportunity he welcomed. It would take him away from the direct line he had marked out for himself. Then, too, if he became a shell collector only, he would have no money coming to him until the spring planting season, and he did not see how he could get along without some regular income. Finally, he was reluctant to leave the employ of Captain Rumford.

He had almost decided not to accept the offer, when he thought of Hawley. "Why, he could

collect most of those shells himself, if he worked at it all day," thought Alec. "He can get around so fast with the little motor that he might be able to do it all himself. Now, how can we arrange it?"

He thought over the matter a long time. Before he fell asleep he had decided what to do. Next morning he sought Hawley on the latter's ship the instant he was up.

"Jim," he said, "the oystermen want me to take all their shells. I'd like to do it. There would be a nice profit in it, but I can't very well give up my job on the *Bertha B* and go to collecting shells on nothing a week. Now if you would go into partnership with me ——"

"On nothing a week?" laughed the big sailor.

Alec joined in the laugh. "Looks as though that's what I want, doesn't it? But listen, Jim. Here's my plan. You stay here and handle the shells. I will be on hand to help you every afternoon. With the motor in our boat we can handle them all easily. I'll draw my pay on the *Bertha B* and give you ten dollars each week. That isn't much, but it will keep you until we sell the shells. Then you can repay me from your share of the proceeds. I've been figuring out how many we'll have, and there'll be enough to bring us both a good profit for all the time and money we put into it. What do you think of it?"

"If it will help you," said Hawley, "you just bet I'll do it."

"It'll help us both."

“Then that settles it. Here’s to the new firm, ‘Cunningham and Hawley, shell merchants.’”

And turning to the table, Hawley poured out drinks for them both. But it was only coffee.

“Shall we have a sign painted?” he laughed.

CHAPTER XIV

THE CORNER-STONE THAT ALEC FOUND

NOW that Alec and Jim got all the shells from all the shippers, their pile grew with unbelievable rapidity. Although the number of shells had increased so greatly, yet big Jim Hawley was almost always able to handle the entire day's harvest himself. The powerful little motor shot his boat from point to point with great speed; and the sailor himself was so strong and powerful that he could shovel the shells out of his boat while most other men would have been thinking about it. Thus it happened that Alec seldom had to help his partner, when the *Bertha B* made fast for the day.

But Alec was not one to waste his time. Whenever Jim did not need him, Alec hustled up to the shipper's office and helped with the clerical work. To his delight, Captain Rumford finally procured a typewriter, the rubber stamps, and some other office equipment suggested by Alec. With the aid of these and the assistance Alec was able to give him, Captain Rumford now easily performed the office work that had previously been such a burden to him. When Sailor Hawley saw the situation, and realized that Alec had a good chance for promo-

tion if he could be regular with the office work, he told Alec that the shell collections had fallen off so much he would not need any help during the remainder of the season. Perhaps he told the truth.

Alec, at any rate, now felt free to give Captain Rumford his time every afternoon. Usually the skipper was able to set Alec ashore by half-past three o'clock. In the two hours that remained before Captain Rumford drove home, the captain dictated answers to all his letters, Alec taking the dictation direct on his typewriter. He had to do this, as he had never studied stenography. Often, now, he wished he had. But he had never foreseen the need of it. His deficiency taught him a good lesson, however.

"It just goes to show that you never can tell what will come useful," said Alec. "I'll worry along all right without stenography, I suppose, but you can just bet that in this oyster game I'm going to know everything I possibly can pick up that has the slightest bearing on the business. I'm not going to wake up after I'm a shipper and find that there is something about my business that I don't know."

As the winter wore on, work declined at the oyster piers and men were laid off. Many beds had long ago been dredged clean of their oysters. Boat after boat was made fast for the season. The fleet dwindled almost daily in numbers. Then there came periods of very rough weather, when all the boats remained at their piers. Those days Alec

spent wholly in the office. So his pay continued without interruption. Better still it increased. As a deck-hand he had been getting \$17.50 a week. The shipper increased his stipend to \$20 a week.

But better even than the increase in pay was the opportunity that came to visit the captain's home. For often at the week-end Alec was now asked to accompany the shipper home. Usually he merely spent the evening there, returning to Bivalve by trolley. But once in a while he was asked to spend Sunday with the Rumfords. Elsa, of course, hailed his visits with delight. And it was not long before Mrs. Rumford was almost as glad to see Alec as her daughter was. About the only welcome Alec ever got from the head of the house was the statement the latter made, when he ushered the lad in at the door, "Well, mother, here's this Alec Cunningham again. He pestered me so to bring him along that I hadn't the heart to refuse."

Of course, there wasn't a word of truth in it, but just the same it always embarrassed Alec a little bit, much to the delight of Elsa. Probably that was why the shipper teased the lad, for Elsa was the apple of his eye. To please her, he would have done things far more foreign to his nature than to crack a joke.

Probably the reason Elsa was so fond of Alec was because he treated her as an absolute equal. There was no hint of condescension on his part when he talked with her, no suggestion of superiority. He never intimated that because she was a girl she

shouldn't do this or that thing that he did. Like the majority of American girls of to-day, Elsa was independent, sensible, thoughtful, and able. So her tastes and desires were remarkably like those of any other normal person of her age and training. She liked sailing, tennis, swimming, basket-ball, motoring, camping, and similar sports, and was quite as intelligent about them as most boys would have been. With similar likes himself, Alec understood her feelings exactly and treated her much as he would have treated a boy chum of his own age. Though he was doubtless a little more chivalrous toward her than he would have been to one of his boy friends, he did not carry his chivalry to the point where it interfered with their friendship. So the two became very good chums, indeed. It was a matter of delight to them both that Alec was able to help her with many a knotty point in her studies. In every way the two seemed fashioned to be the best of friends.

To Alec the privilege of coming to the captain's house meant more than he could have told. Alec and his father had lived with a very estimable family. Here at Bivalve he missed greatly that home influence. His companions on the *Bertha B* and at the piers he had come to esteem greatly; yet they were mostly rough workingmen, uncouth in speech and manner, though pure gold at heart. Alec was at an age and in a situation when he especially needed the refining influence of a good home. He got it in Captain Rumford's home.

Just why Captain Rumford chose to take Alec to his home, the inscrutable oyster shipper never said. But he never did anything without a reason. Outsiders who knew about the matter attached far more significance to it than Alec possibly could. Also they understood much better than Alec did how fortunate a lad he was. With the leading oyster shipper at Bivalve back of him, Alec's future was already secure if he chose to become an oyster-planter himself.

Alec, fortunately, never once thought of the matter in that light. He didn't even know that the shipper was behind him. In his own mind he was simply an employee whom the shipper, for some reason or other, had come to like. And he meant to do everything in his power to retain Captain Rumford's good-will.

It pleased Alec immensely that he had been able to help his benefactor so much with his office work. The changes that had been made seemed to lighten the work daily. Yet the changes already made were not all that Alec hoped to make. He wanted a better system of filing and keeping records. Every time he looked at the dusty pigeonholes in the old rack above the captain's desk, each stuffed full of miscellaneous contents, his fingers itched to tear the whole thing out and install some modern filing cases. But he knew he must bide his time for that.

Very late in the winter, or very early in the spring, when the oyster business was getting toward

its lowest ebb and the office work was light, Alec asked permission to clean the office. The shipper looked at him in amazement.

"What for?" he asked.

"Perhaps we could arrange things in a way that would expedite our work," replied Alec, watching his boss out of the corner of his eye.

"Um!" grunted the shipper. "It's likely! Why, I've done business with this office just as it is for more than thirty years and never found it necessary yet to change things."

But in the end, he consented. Alec moved their two desks somewhat, so as to get better light on them and shifted a few other things. But the main thing he wanted to do was to clear out those dusty old pigeonholes, and get the contents arranged better. So he began to take the contents from pigeonhole after pigeonhole, laying the things he took out in orderly little piles and trying to rearrange and classify them. But when he reached the second row in the rack, he suddenly lost all interest in his work. Out of the pigeonhole came a familiar-looking pamphlet, like dozens of government bulletins Alec had seen at the high school in Central City. Alec was about to drop it on the desk when the title caught his eye. It was "Aids to Successful Oyster-Culture." The bulletin had recently been issued by the New Jersey Experiment station.

"Where did you get this?" cried Alec, all afire with interest.

"What?" said the shipper, glancing up from his

work. Then, after seeing what it was, "Oh! That! Why, that's something the state got out. Somebody sent me a copy."

"Is it interesting?" asked Alec.

"To tell the truth, I never had time to read it. I stuck it in that pigeonhole and there it's been ever since."

Alec looked aghast. "Never read it!" he cried. "Would you be willing to lend it to me? I'll take good care of it and be sure to return it."

"Take it and keep it. I don't want it."

Alec folded the bulletin and placed it in his pocket as though it were rarest treasure. Into his mind flashed the Master's words: "The stone which the builders rejected is become the head of the corner."

"Who knows?" he said to himself, "but this may be the very corner-stone for the structure I intend to build? It may be the very thing I have been searching for. My entire future may depend upon what I read in this bulletin."

CHAPTER XV

A NEW LIGHT

EVEN a cursory examination of the bulletin told Alec he was right in thinking that the little pamphlet held the secrets for which he had been searching. Here, in this unconsidered little publication that had been consigned to the oblivion of a dusty pigeonhole by a man who was beginning to fall behind the times, was an open sesame to the treasure-house of the deep. Alec wondered how many more of these bulletins were likewise resting in dusty pigeonholes. He was sure there must be many of them similarly tucked out of sight, for the bulletin, which was the very first of a series planned by the state to set forth the knowledge of the oyster that had been accumulated by the scientists of the world, plainly said that the position of the oyster-planter of to-day was very similar to that of the land farmer of fifty years ago, before the application of scientific methods to agriculture. If that were true, Alec knew that little heed would be given to the publication by many of the oyster-planters. They were too old to change. The situation gave him the opportunity to become a pioneer and, he firmly believed, to reap the rewards of the pioneer.

The quality that distinguished Alec's mind from the mind of the average lad of his years was that of understanding or comprehension. At school he had never won unusual grades; yet he had been an unusual student. Indeed, it would have been remarkable had a lad of his wide interests gained high marks. His participation in athletics, his accomplishments with the wireless, his devotion to nature and out-of-door pleasures, and his efforts along many lines not directly connected with his studies, practically precluded the possibility of his being an honor student. Yet no winner of high grades ever understood what he studied better than Alec comprehended the work he covered. Very early Alec had imbibed the idea that the purpose of schooling is understanding, not grades, ability to accomplish, and not diplomas. So he had been more or less indifferent to the marks he received, but very particular to grasp what he studied. To an unusual degree he had gained the essence of education, which is the ability to think. He saw facts as they were, he drew correct deductions from these facts, and he consequently came to truthful conclusions.

Nothing whatever could have meant as much to Alec, situated as he now was, as did this double ability to understand facts and to draw right conclusions from them. He was just starting his life-work. He was building his career. He was erecting a structure to last a lifetime and perhaps many generations longer. He must fight for all he got.

There would be few who cared whether he built well or poorly, and fewer still to help him. His alone was the responsibility for the quality of the job he was doing. What he had told Captain Rumford was true: he wanted to know, not only about what oyster-planters had done and were doing, but also what they would be doing in future. Alec had always been like that. He had always wanted to know the whole truth.

As he read the bulletin in his hands, he told himself that he was a fortunate lad, indeed. If oyster-farming is to-day just where land farming was half a century ago, he told himself, he had become an oysterman at exactly the right moment. He had had a great deal more schooling than most of the men now in the business. He could learn the truth more easily. He had the advantage of knowing nothing whatever about the oyster business, so that he had no prejudices to hamper him, no preconceived ideas to hold him back. He was free to learn the truth, and when he found it, to act accordingly. He could make all his plans upon a scientific basis. He could be a pioneer in scientific oyster-culture. And like the farmers who sprayed their fruit-trees while their neighbors laughed at them, and the dairymen who began raising blooded stock while their neighbors ridiculed them, he would reap his reward, the same as those intelligent orchardists and cattlemen had done.

Perhaps Alec did not actually think the situation out in such detail, but the underlying idea he felt

very strongly. He had come into the oyster business at a time when it was about to undergo a change. Not all the oyster-shippers, he felt sure, would toss aside this valuable compendium of information as thoughtlessly as Captain Rumford had done. Few of them, perhaps, were as well qualified as he himself was to carry out the suggestions made in the book; for he had studied biology. He knew how to use the microscope. He was familiar with the work that would be required of the scientific oysterman as suggested by the bulletin.

For this marvelous little publication told him, not only about the life-history and habits of oysters, but also how and where they could best be raised. An open sesame, indeed, was this book. For Alec had long understood that the present method of oyster-culture was largely a game of blind man's buff.

When he had asked the skipper how the oystermen knew good grounds from poor ones, the captain had replied, "They don't. All they can do is to shell 'em and see if they get a set."

That was the doctrine and belief of an experienced and able captain of an oyster-boat. Yet here in his very hands Alec had proof that an intelligent person could discover where the good grounds were, easily and cheaply. It wasn't necessary to own a ship and buy thousands of bushels of shells and employ expensive help to spread them in order to find out whether a given place would make good grounds or not. With very little equipment Alec knew he could test the matter as well as anybody.

He almost cried aloud with sheer joy. For though the planted beds covered 30,000 acres, and doubtless included many and perhaps most of the good grounds, Alec did not doubt that there still remained unstaked areas that would make as good oyster-beds as any already "stuck up." His job was to find them while he was getting together the money to buy his equipment.

When Alec had gone hastily through the bulletin once, he again began to read it, this time slowly and painstakingly. He found that Skipper Bagley's assertion that one oyster produces millions of little oysters was not only true, but was almost an understatement, so incredible was the actual number, estimated by the scientists at sixteen to sixty millions, depending upon the size, age, and vigor of the spawning oyster. And it was equally true, as the skipper had said, that one could not see newly-formed oysters with the naked eye; for, even at two weeks of age, when they are about ready to attach to something, they were still scarcely visible.

What fairly astounded Alec was the fact that each tiny oyster larva has a foot, which is later absorbed into the body when there is no longer need for it. For, contrary to what the skipper had told him, the oyster fry not only have the power to move about in the water, but they do not die at once if they sink to the bottom and find no suitable place of attachment. With its tiny foot, each microscopic oyster is able to move about on the bottom, and does move about, a few inches at a

time, seeking a place of attachment. It has other methods of locomotion as well. Hair-like growths that act like propellers, give it the power to move slowly through the waters. Thus it creeps and swims, searching here and there until it finds the resting-place it is after. Then it makes fast to the place selected, and its shell rapidly enlarges. In ten hours' time it has become as large as a grain of pepper.

And the bulletin's suggestions as to shelling oyster-beds, Alec noted, were directly at variance with established practices. For Alec knew that ordinarily the shells were spread broadcast, in an effort to cover as much of the bottom as possible, whereas the bulletin advised the planting of shells in windrows, placed transversely to the current, and piled to the depth of ten inches or even a foot, so as to afford more exposed surfaces than could be offered by shells broadcasted and lying flat in the mud. For now Alec learned, to his astonishment, that the tiny oysters do not necessarily drop downward in their search for a place of attachment, but also rise upward. And since sediment does not collect to any great extent on the under surface of bodies held in the water, the under sides will afford the cleaner places of attachment. In proof of this, the bulletin showed several shells that had been suspended in the water for five days during the spawning season. Though they were clean when put into the water, enough sediment had collected in that short time to prevent the attachment of a single

spat to their upper surfaces, while one shell alone had seventy-three spats attached to its under surface at the end of five days.

"Why, that's just common-sense," cried Alec. "Of course an under surface stays cleaner in the water than an upper surface. Anybody knows that. And shells heaped in windrows will present a thousand times as many under surfaces as shells thrown flat in the mud. You bet I won't forget that."

There were many other things that astonished Alec. He learned that spawning activities are controlled almost wholly by temperature, oysters never spawning before the water reaches a temperature of at least 68 degrees and generally 70 degrees, while spawning activity increases with the increase in the temperature of the water. Alec saw at once that there might thus be great seasonal variation in the amount of spawn produced, and that a cold, cloudy summer might result in little or no oyster fry being spawned, while a hot, cloudless spring and summer, particularly if the wind did not stir up the water too much, would almost certainly result in a tremendous output of oyster larvæ.

"Looks to me," said Alec, with characteristic insight, "as though it wasn't worth going to the expense of shelling a bed if it happens to be a very cold year," and he was pleased when in reading farther he found that the bulletin confirmed his judgment.

Furthermore Alec knew that deep water would

remain cold while shallow water grew warm. And as the oyster remains practically at the temperature of the water surrounding it, he saw that here was another problem to be considered in the greatest of all the problems that he believed lay before him. That was the problem of finding a good oyster ground. For Alec had no hope of ever being able to buy a ground already established. Within a very few days such an established bed had changed hands, and the price paid by the purchaser was \$25,000. Of course this was a big bed, but Alec knew that any productive bed at all would command a high price. What he must do when he became a planter was to stake out new grounds that he could get from the state merely for the annual rental of seventy-five cents an acre.

To procure such a bed was a simple enough matter, but to procure a bed that would be productive, where the planting of shells would result in a good set of spat, was quite another matter. As the skipper had told him, it was commonly believed that all the good beds had already been "stuck up." That fact had been the most discouraging thing Alec had had to face, as he thought over his plans for the future. But now light was coming to him. One of the factors he must consider in the selection of his grounds was water temperature. Depth was an important factor, and so, too, was the movement of the water, for turbulent water meant cold water, while still water meant warm water.

When Alec studied that portion of his book that

dealt with tides and currents, he fairly hugged himself for joy. Now he knew how to determine the other factors in the problem of locating his beds. For the bulletin told him that with the ebb and flow of the tide certain main currents are produced over an oyster-bed which are quite definite in direction and which vary but little from year to year, while the configuration of the shore and the bottom produces smaller currents and eddies in conjunction with these main currents. And these currents would have very much to do with the matter of locating an oyster-bed.

For an abrupt ridge, or raised area of the bottom, will produce one or more eddies, thus resulting in a region of slack water. Along the margin of every well defined channel, areas occur where the water lags behind that in the channel itself. And these areas are often so sharply marked off that one may follow them without difficulty for miles, owing to the appearance of the water. "Any one who has noticed these 'slicks,'" said the bulletin, "has noticed the foam and surface debris which collect there."

Many a time had Alec noted these slick stretches of water and wondered at them, seeking a reason for their smoothness. Here it was explained. But the full connection between a slick and an oyster-bed below it was not apparent to Alec until he read, "The oyster larvæ, though free-swimming, move so slowly that they are carried about by the currents much as grains of sand would be. They,

therefore, tend to collect in these regions of slicks and eddies, along with a host of other microscopic plants and animals. In such places there occurs a heavier set of spat than elsewhere in that neighborhood. Find the oyster larvæ in the water, then get your shells under them."

There was the secret Alec had been searching for. Now he knew how to go about the selection of his oyster grounds. "Find the oyster larvæ in the water and get your shells under them."

One difficulty alone seemed to present itself. As a deck-hand he would be busy until the end of June, and by that time he feared spawning might be nearly ended. How could he do his duty to his employer and at the same time study the waters in the oyster-beds as he saw he would need to do? But he was reassured as he read further and found that in the Delaware Bay and other deep waters in New Jersey, spawning is a more or less continuous process, running from the first of July to the latter part of August.

Not even on that first morning at Bivalve, when he suddenly found his condition changed from that of a shivering, hungry, penniless lad, to a situation where he had a warm place to sleep, plenty of good food to eat, and a generous wage coming to him daily, did Alec feel more elated than he felt now. He had had a very rough experience. He had gone through an unforeseen crisis, when all the supports had been knocked from under his young life and he had suddenly had to

stand wholly on his own feet. At first he had had to choose what he would do merely to exist. Later he had had to decide what he meant to make of himself. Even when chance had put him on ship-board, and circumstances had almost seemed to drive him to choose oystering as his calling, the situation had seemed hopelessly difficult, so much of both knowledge and capital were necessary, and both seemed so hard to acquire. And now, here in his very hand, he suddenly found the map that showed him his path clear and distinct.

No wonder he cried aloud for joy. Now he knew, not only where he was going, but also how to get there. To be sure, it would take him years to attain his goal. But that would have been true, no matter what he attempted. There was nothing discouraging about that. There was nothing discouraging about any aspect of his situation. He had a steady job and was saving money, even though half his wages went to support his partner in the shell business. The shell venture was certain to net him a generous return. With his father's gravestone paid for, Alec had practically no expenses, save for clothes and incidentals, and these were small enough. He had no time for nightly diversion at some neighboring town, even had he desired it, and he used neither tobacco nor strong drink. The clothes he had worn upon his arrival were of good cut and material. He had had them cleaned and pressed when he got rougher garments for his daily labor, and these good clothes would

last for a long time. So he could save a goodly sum each week even on half of his wages. If he continued to work hard and take advantage of every opportunity that offered, he knew his income was certain to increase and his savings multiply accordingly. No wonder Alec felt jubilant. No wonder he felt as though he were already standing at the wheel of *Old Honesty*, the ship of his dreams. No wonder, either, that he could not discern the rocks that rose ahead with evil portent.

CHAPTER XVI

THE PLANTING SEASON BEGINS

WEEEKS passed. The oyster business grew duller and duller. More and more ships were laid up for the winter. For days at a time the *Bertha B* lay fast at her pier. To a lad of Alec's energetic, impatient nature, it was a trying period. There was so little that he could do. From bowsprit to taffrail he already knew every rope and stick and implement on an oyster-boat, and the uses of them all. He knew the various parts of the engine and comprehended their functions. He had already learned how to splice a rope, reef a sail, bend on a line, cast a hawser, and do a thousand other tasks aboard ship. Ashore, he had inquired into every phase of the oyster business he could think of. Like Alexander, he sighed for more worlds to conquer; for it seemed to Alec as though there was nothing new left for him to do. He felt like a soldier marking time. He was going through the motions, perhaps, but not advancing. And to Alec's impatient nature, that meant that he was wasting his time, throwing away the only capital he possessed.

In reality his time was far from wasted. Though he did not realize it, he was continually picking up knowledge that was to be of use to him. Always he was on the alert. Ever he was asking questions. Continually he was weighing this and that practice in his mind. And from night to night, as he sat in the warm cabin of the *Bertha B*, talking with the skipper and Joe, both of whom lived aboard with him, he absorbed a vast fund of useful and practical information.

Of this fact Alec was hardly conscious. To him it seemed as though he were merely killing time by listening to the engaging yarns of the skipper; for Captain Bagley, like all real sailors, could tell the most fascinating stories of the sea. But through the medium of these stories Alec unconsciously picked up a great deal of information about the waters he would have to navigate as an oysterman, about the currents, the tides, the winds, the storms, the calms—in short about the very things he needed to know. Whenever he heard the least thing that was likely to be of use to him, he unconsciously singled it out and put it away in the storehouse of his memory.

For to Alec, as to every real thinker, it was given to learn through the experiences of others quite as much as through his own experiences. Indeed, Alec early had seen the folly of learning through his own experience if he could possibly learn through that of another. It might be true, he knew, that experience is the best teacher. But he quickly

saw that he is a fool who learns only through his own experience. So, although the time seemed to drag, and he chafed under the enforced idleness, Alec was really acquiring something worth while all the time. Any one does who is really desirous of learning.

But on one account Alec was not sorry because things were so dull. He saw a great deal of Elsa. Alec's bright, cheerful ways had endeared him to the entire Rumford family. The shipper welcomed him to his home because he felt that he would rather have Elsa associate with Alec than with most of the lads he knew. The others might be all right or they might not be. Alec was true as steel. In a hundred ways the shipper had seen him tested. He *knew* about Alec.

Had Alec realized these things he would have been both gratified and puzzled—gratified to know that the captain really did think so well of him, yet puzzled to know why it was so. For in some ways Alec was singularly childlike. At the captain's home or in the captain's presence he had not acted in any way different from the way he always acted. What Alec did not realize was how fine at heart he really was. But though Alec did not comprehend these things about himself, the shipper understood them readily enough. And he knew, as well as he knew anything, that if he himself lived his allotted time, he would see the day when Alec stood at the very top of the oyster business. It is just as impossible to keep down a lad like Alec, as it is

to dam back forever the waters of a stream. Either may be held back for a time. In the end both will break through.

One thing these days of idleness did for Alec that he did not comprehend at all. They gave him to the last measure the full coöperation and sympathy of Elsa. In an intangible way that neither understood or appreciated their relationship underwent a very real change.

By this time Alec's plans for the future were beginning to take tangible form. His ideas had crystallized. They were concrete enough to talk about in exact terms. And Alec wanted to talk about them. He wanted to discuss them with some one who could comprehend and sympathize with his plans, and yet criticize them in a friendly, intelligent way. Jim Hawley, though big of heart, hadn't the kind of mind to grasp what Alec was aiming at; Captain Bagley would have been indifferent to the matter; and Captain Rumford would have regarded Alec's plans as the veriest rubbish. Besides these three, there were no men in the oyster fleet with whom Alec would have been willing to discuss his plans.

Elsa met every requirement. When Alec told her what was in his mind she comprehended exactly what he meant, she sympathized fully with his position, she passed judgment on his schemes with the friendliest sort of criticism. It was exactly the sort of help Alec needed most. It gave him increased confidence in his own plans and stiffened his

courage. He knew that Elsa understood him and sympathized with him fully and he needed such sympathetic understanding and encouragement if he were to win through.

As the days lengthened and winter drew near to spring, there was more activity in the oyster fleet. Planters began to inquire for shells. Farmers began to bring loads of stakes with which to mark the oyster-beds afresh. Boats were overhauled. Propellers were removed from power craft or boxed in such a way as to render them useless, for the law prohibited any power boats from going on the natural oyster-beds. Nothing but sails could be used in dredging seed-oysters.

Then at last came the planting season itself, the great event in the oysterman's year. From far and wide a huge fleet assembled. Every boat that could still carry a sail and drag a dredge joined the assembly. The river was fairly jammed with oyster-boats. At every pier ship after ship made fast until the rows of boats extended far out into the stream. The piers themselves took on new life. Now they fairly hummed with activity. Ships were freshly provisioned. New supplies of all sorts were brought aboard. Chains and dredges were examined and stowed in the holds. Great crews were recruited, double or triple the size of the crews ordinarily carried. From miles around came every able-bodied man to join the fleet. Ships were continually passing to and from oyster-beds, where new stakes were being put down and everything possible

done in advance to get ready for the actual planting.

Then came the great day, the first of May. On the afternoon before, ship after ship cast loose and headed for the oyster grounds. Now Alec saw a sight that stirred his blood and made his heart beat faster. Down the river went the fleet, ship after ship, dozens, scores, hundreds of them, heeling in the wind, their sails shining in the sun, like a wondrous flock of huge, white birds.

Like schoolboys on a lark were the men aboard these ships. Like Alec, they had chafed at their enforced idleness. The feeling of spring was in their blood. The spirit of fun was abroad among them. Laughter rose from every deck. Across the water voice called to voice. Old friends greeted one another across the dancing waves. Skipper hailed skipper. To right and left challenges were flung, and boat after boat picked up her heels to prove her master's assertion that she was faster than her neighbor. A dozen races were staged at once.

So the fleet proceeded, like a great covey of birds, out of the sheltering river and into the open Bay. Across the oyster-beds raced the rolling vessels, now spread out in wide array, pressing on and on until they joined their fellows who had come before, and dropped their anchors at the very side of the Southwest Line, where the state had said, "Thus far and no farther, shalt thou go."

Now Alec witnessed a sight that thrilled him as few things in all his life had done. Nightfall found

practically every ship in the fleet anchored near the line. North, east, south, and west of the *Bertha B* oyster-boats lay at rest. Aloft a white light glimmered on every ship. And as the boats moved ever so slightly in the gentle swell, these lamps aloft swayed slowly back and forth, as though signalling one to another. The weather was balmy, the night was lighted by a radiant moon. The gentlest of breezes sighed through the rigging. The beauty of the night drew Alec on deck as irresistibly as a powerful magnet draws a piece of steel. For a time he stood by the ship's rail, looking at the gently heaving water, studying the swirls in the tide, as they shone and sparkled in the moonlight, listening to the gentle slap! slap! slap! of the waves against the oaken sides of the *Bertha B*.

From her cabin, and from the cabins of sister ships arose the sound of laughter, the noise of raucous voices. In the calm and holy beauty of the night they seemed out of place. To Alec's sensitive soul they were as discordant as the rasping tones of a horse fiddle. He wanted to get away from them, where he could drink in the beauty of the scene undisturbed; where he could steep himself in the spirit of the night. So he clambered up the rigging and perched himself on the crosstrees.

Now he was like one in a tower. He could see far and wide. Beneath him the white ships, huddled together, made him think of a flock of sheep, herded for the night. And afar off on the dancing water Alec saw the laggards of the flock hastening toward

the fold. Like little white specks they seemed in the far distance. Then, as they drew nearer and nearer, their sails seemed to grow larger and larger, until suddenly they appeared gigantic. With majestic flight, like the sweep of darting gulls, they bore to right or left, seeking their places of rest. Then came the faint splash of anchors, the rattling sound of tackle blocks as the great white wings were lowered, and presently peace.

One by one the cabin lamps were doused, until only sailing lights shone throughout the fleet. One by one the raucous voices were stilled, and peace enfolded the nestling ships as a hen hovers above her little ones. Still Alec sat in the crosstrees, watching the swaying lights, studying the swirling waters, peering along the moon's broad path of gold that seemed to lead straight from the little fleet to the Shepherd keeping watch above.

When or how Alec got to bed he never knew. It seemed to him as though he had only just turned in when he heard Dick punching up the fire. In a moment he was afoot, for this was no time for laggards. It was well enough to dream in the moonlight, when the day's work was done; but this was the time for action, the time to turn his dreams into something tangible. For before them lay the prize, free for the taking the moment the sun's rising disc should touch the horizon. He who would grasp it must be ready.

Throughout the fleet arose the sounds of preparation. Lights glowed in every cabin. Lanterns

bobbed on every deck. From every direction came the creak of tackle blocks as sails were hoisted. Here and there capstans clanked, as enterprising skippers hoisted anchor, to jockey for more advantageous positions. For the moment the sun arose, the entire fleet would sweep over the line in the race for the coveted oyster-seed. Some boats were heading east and some were going west in the hope of bettering their positions.

As the light increased, the breeze freshened. The water began to dance beneath its touch. Over all rested a slight haze, intensified here and there, by wisps of smoke from cabin fires. And curling upward from the surface of the Bay, rose little cloudlets of mist or fog. Streaks of color crept into the eastern sky, growing, little by little, until the firmament was a gorgeous, glowing tapestry of gold, shot with purple, pink, and orange.

From every side now rose the rattling of anchor chains, the clank of capstans, the creaking of the tackle. In increasing numbers the oyster-boats spread their wings and slipped away. Soon not a ship lay at anchor. Like a mammoth flock of giant gulls, the oyster-boats were darting here and there, their fresh, white sails shining in the morning glow, as they bellied in the wind. Rare, indeed, was the sight; rare and wonderful. For hundreds of ships were now in motion, the waves foaming white at their bows, the spray splashing upward on their decks, and in their wakes yeasty patterns of swirling water. At every stern stood a silent figure, twirl-

ing his wheel now this way, now that, watchful of the east and the mounting color there.

Now sweeping near the line, now darting away, now weaving in and out among her sister ships, the *Bertha B* skimmed over the waves with the grace of a gull, about to swoop on its prey. Her crew were on deck, ready to spring to dredge or tackle. Her captain stood at his wheel, silent, watchful as a hawk.

Suddenly the fiery rim of the sun peered over the edge of the world. A thousand watchful eyes beheld it, and a great shout went up from the fleet. Over went the rudders, around swung the ships, and the entire fleet darted straight for the line that marked their goal.

“Let go the dredges!” thundered the skipper, as the *Bertha B* swept over the mark, and a splash arose on either side of the boat as the dredges struck the waves.

From hundreds of other craft dredges were falling into the sea. With every sail set, the speeding oyster-boats tugged at their loads as restive dogs straining at the leash. Now there was no engine to do the hoisting; but men stood in pairs at the winders, ready to reel up the windlasses and lift the laden dredge. How they worked! How they turned their reels! How the dredges came plunging over the rollers! How the oysters poured out on the decks! How the nimble fingers flew to cull the glistening piles! How the shovels flashed, and the shells glinted in the sun, as strong arms heaved

them back into the sea! How the piles of tiny oysters grew!

What a sight it was! From far and near, from east and west, from north and south, from every oyster town about the Bay, came scores of boats to add their shining sails to the great fleet. Look where he would, Alec could see ships sweeping along before the breeze, their decks crowded with toiling men, bulking high with oysters. Never, as long as he lived, would he forget that scene.

Hour after hour the work went on. Basket by basket the piles of oysters grew. The bow was full of them. The after deck was buried under them. The cabin was hidden by them. Still the work went on. The *Bertha B* sank lower and lower in the water, as ton after ton was piled on her deck.

Suddenly there was a sharp command from the skipper. The dredges went overboard no more. The *Bertha B* heeled far over in the wind, swung wide to avoid her sister ships, and headed for her oyster grounds. Heavily she rode the waves, plowing bodily through them. Through the fleet she sailed, over the Southwest Line, and on to her planting grounds. Near and far, other laden ships sailed with her. And now she had reached her grounds. How the shovels flew, how the tiny oysters went splashing into the sea, flung far and wide from either side. Back and forth, back and forth, sailed the *Bertha B*, while skilled hands spread the precious seed.

Now her deck was empty. To the last oyster it

had been cleaned. Sharp about swung the little vessel, crowding on all sail, taking advantage of every wind, hastening back to the seed grounds.

Day after day, in rain and in shine, in fog and when the sun shone clear, with the wind whistling sharp and in days of calm, the *Bertha B* sailed back and forth over the breeding grounds, and to and from her planting beds. And every hand aboard of her toiled to his utmost. No more did the little vessel nightly seek her harbor. No more did the fleet sail in and out with each rising and setting of the sun. And when the planting was finished, came the shelling of the grounds, the *Bertha B* daily bringing huge deck loads of shells to scatter on the bottom of the beds.

During the spring planting days Alec learned what it meant to sleep in the cradle of the deep. Sometimes the moon fell soft on the sleeping waters, when he sought his bunk. And again inky clouds blotted out the stars, and the wind souged ominously through the rigging, or storms whistled past the ship's bare poles, as she wallowed at her anchor in the rolling waves. But soon it was all one to Alec. He was doing a man's work. He was toiling like a Trojan. And neither the lure of the moonbeams nor the roar of a storm could long keep him from his bunk, once night had come.

By the end of June, when the planting season was over, and the *Bertha B* for the last time lifted her anchor and homeward winged her way, Alec had become a sailor as well as an oysterman. He had

learned a tremendous lot, not only about oysters, but also about handling a ship. Once he had thought he was a sailor, when he manœuvred his little boat at home. Now he smiled at the memory of those earlier efforts. They seemed childish, indeed. For more than once he had been allowed to handle the *Bertha B* as she flew across the Bay. And he had picked up a tremendous lot of information about currents, eddies, drifts, shoals, tides, slicks, and storms. He was getting his tool-kit thoroughly stocked indeed. It was well, for he would soon have need of all the skill and knowledge he possessed.

CHAPTER XVII

A SEARCH FOR TRUTH

EARLY July, which saw the end of both oyster planting, and the shelling of the grounds, found the pile of shells of Cunningham and Hawley entirely exhausted. Where so recently these shells had risen in a mountainous heap, there was now only bare earth, whitened with shell chips. There had been thousands of bushels in the pile. When the partners reckoned up their income and adjusted their finances, each had a nice little sum of money.

The instant their affairs were settled, Alec set about other matters. Long ago he had ordered and received the instruments that he knew would be necessary in his summer's work. These included a compound microscope, half a dozen concave watch crystals, two settling glasses, two graduated cylinders, two glass pipettes, two large rubber pipettes, four small medicine droppers, a ten-quart galvanized bucket, a simple lift pump, some rubber hose, and a salinometer with thermometer enclosed. In addition Alec had picked up some wide-mouthed bottles, for holding samples; had fastened several needles in wooden handles he had whittled out of sticks; and had bought a yard of bolting-cloth with

very fine meshes, from which, with Elsa's assistance, he had made a net, conical in shape, fastened about a metal ring, with an opening at the bottom that could be closed tight with a draw string.

Even by practicing what economies he could, Alec had had to spend nearly seventy-five dollars for the outfit. More than once he had asked himself if it was really worth while; if, after all, these old practical oyster captains didn't really know more about how and where to grow oysters than any mere scientific theorist possibly could. Wasn't he really foolish to spend all this money? Wasn't he really throwing it away? He had such need for it, in the purchase of articles more commonly seen in an oyster fleet. His doubts had hurt and discouraged him. He needed some one with whom he could talk the matter over. When he looked about, he saw the same old situation. It was useless to talk to any of his three friends, Hawley, Bagley, or the shipper. He knew that not one of them would consider the matter from a serious, impartial, reasonable view-point. So he had been forced to take the matter to Elsa.

"Never mind about the expense," she had counseled, when they had discussed the situation fully. "You won't be spending as much for your entire outfit as most young fellows spend for tobacco and the movies. You'll have something valuable to show for your money, and what you buy won't harm you, even if you shouldn't find it as useful as you hope."

"But suppose there's nothing in it, after all?" Alec had said. "Suppose I buy my outfit and it doesn't do me a bit of good. What then? I can't afford to throw away seventy-five dollars for nothing. I need every cent I earn if I'm ever going to get anywhere."

"You *can't* buy this outfit and have it do you no good," Elsa had replied.

"I just guess I could. Suppose I bought the things and then didn't find what I am after?"

"Even so, it would do you good."

"How?"

"Alec Cunningham! Sometimes I think you're the stupidest thing I ever met. The idea of asking a question like that, when you've been working and studying like mad for months to find out all you can about the oyster business. Of course it will help you. If you find what you want, you are benefited, aren't you? And if you don't find it, you're benefited just the same."

"How?" Alec had inquired.

"Stupid. It isn't oyster fry you're after. It's truth. You'll get it, no matter whether it pleases you or not. Won't you? You'll know whether that bulletin is right or whether the old oystermen are right, won't you? And that's worth a great deal more than seventy-five dollars, isn't it? Why, Alec, if you don't go ahead and test the thing, you'll never be happy. You'll fret and fret about it, thinking you ought to be planning your work differently. And if you do go ahead, no matter what

you learn, you'll be satisfied. You'll know whether to follow old practices or try new ones. Certainly it's worth a good deal to know you're right. Then you'll know you must succeed if you keep on in the same way."

"Elsa," Alec had said, "I guess we are all fools at times. I had this thing all thought out in my mind and my decision made; but when it came to paying seventy-five dollars just to find out something, I hadn't the courage to do it. You don't know how big seventy-five dollars looks to me."

"Silly!" Elsa had replied. "Don't talk to me about lacking courage, when you make a practice of jumping overboard to fish drowning men out of the water. It isn't courage you lack. It's partnership. If you had somebody to back you up, you'd never hesitate a second about this thing."

"Where did you learn so much?" Alec had answered, with genuine admiration in his glance. "Do you know that's exactly what I need, and I never before knew what it was that was wrong."

"Well, don't you let it worry you any longer, Alec," Elsa had replied. "I understand you and what you are trying to do, and I think it's just fine. And I'll stand back of you no matter what they say. I know Dad will think you are foolish. He thinks anything new is foolish. But never you mind. You just go ahead with your plans."

"That settles it," Alec had replied. "I *am* going ahead, no matter if it costs twice seventy-five dollars. I'm going to find out the truth at any

cost. Why, if a fellow doesn't know the truth, he's like a man who doesn't know how to get to the place he's trying to reach. He may be walking in the wrong direction. It wouldn't do him much good if he was a good walker, would it? And just think how near I came to being a dummy like that myself—all for the sake of seventy-five dollars!"

So the matter had been settled for good, and Alec had ordered the articles, even laughing when it took almost his last cent to pay for them. Now he had them at hand, and he was almost ready to begin his search for the truth—the truth about the oyster fry.

—He lacked only a boat. At first he thought he would buy a boat, but when he found that the kind of boat he wanted, fitted with a good motor, roofed over forward so as to make a little cabin, would cost several hundred dollars, and take every cent he had made in his shell business, he decided that he would rent a boat instead.

There was just such a boat as he wanted, for hire. It was about twenty-five feet long, with a snug yet roomy cabin forward, a single sail, which he could easily manage, and in the cockpit was a small motor, neatly boxed in to protect it from the weather. The boxing could be removed if one wished to run the engine. Alec secured the craft for a reasonable sum, put his scientific outfit aboard, brought his clothes and some bedding, and stocked the larder with sufficient provisions. Nor did he forget his wireless outfit. The *Bertha B*, like all

other oyster craft, was to be overhauled during the summer, and be repaired and repainted. Of necessity, Alec's wireless would have to be taken down and he had already dismantled it and stowed it in a box before finding the little sloop. Now he had only to carry his box aboard, and his little craft was ready to sail. *End*

The process of making ready went along merrily enough, but when it came to sailing away, a trip all by himself suddenly lost its attractiveness. Alec turned the situation over in his mind for some time.

Then he went to his partner in the shell business. "Jim," he said, "I'm going out to the Bay in a little sloop I've hired, to study oyster larvæ. Don't you want to go along?"

Hawley looked at him in blank amazement. "Alec," he said, "I'd do most anything for you, but I sure don't want to go out to no Bay and study oysters. I know all I want to about oysters already. Why, I been ketchin' oysters for twenty years."

Alec appealed to Captain Bagley, with no better results. Finally he went to the shipper.

"What fool's errand is this?" he exclaimed testily, when Alec laid the situation before him. "Why, I've been expecting to keep you busy all summer. I've got a job for you, helping about the boats. You can pay your board and still be saving something all summer, instead of spending all you've earned, like most of these fellows around here do."

Alec really felt grieved to refuse the offer. "Captain Rumford," he said, "I appreciate everything you've done for me, and I thank you for this offer. But I can't take it. This is the only opportunity I have to learn about oysters themselves and I must take it."

"What nonsense are you up to now?" demanded the shipper.

"I'm going out to the Bay to study oysters," said Alec, quietly but firmly. "I have my outfit all ready and I have hired a little sloop to sail in. I'd be mighty glad if you would go out with me."

"Study oysters!" exploded the shipper. "Didn't you learn enough about oysters on the *Bertha B*? And what better outfit do you want than a pair of good dredges, eh? What are you about, anyway? What does all this nonsense mean?"

It was useless to argue or explain. "I'm sorry we don't see things alike, Captain," said Alec. "I believe there is more to learn about oysters than most of us know, and I'm going to try to find it out. If you won't go with me, will you allow me to take Elsa? I'll be back early, sir; and I'll answer for her safety."

"Oh! I ain't afraid to trust the girl with you, boy, but you'll have a dull time trying to study oysters, as you call it, with her on board. She ain't one mite interested in oysters. She wants fun."

"I'll take a chance on that," said Alec, "if you are willing to let her go."

Alec's confidence in Elsa was more than justified. He called her on the telephone and stated the situation. She did not waste a moment in unnecessary talk, but hung up the receiver the moment she understood that Alec wanted her to help him, picked up a sweater and a broad-brimmed hat, and hurried to the oyster pier in her little car. Within a few minutes of the time Alec had called her, the two were afloat.

The little craft that Alec had rented was an excellent boat. Built rather for pleasure than for work, it was very comfortably fitted out. Furthermore, it was the fastest little boat in the harbor. Its lines were excellent, and it slipped through the water as quietly and gracefully as a swan. Being equipped both with sail and engine, the owner was independent of wind and weather, and could go where he liked, when he liked. Unlike most of the boats in the harbor, this craft was painted a dull, leaden gray, that almost matched the color of the water. Alec was glad, for there would be none of the usual glare from the summer sun shining on white woodwork. The glare on the *Bertha B* often made his eyes ache. He was glad that he would not be bothered in that way on the little boat, for he would need to have his eyesight at its very best.

With such an efficient helper aboard, Alec determined not to lose a moment. He started the motor, and soon the little boat was shooting down the river at a fast clip.

"It's queer this boat has no name," said Alec.

“ Oh! It has a name all right, but the name was painted over when the owner put this gray paint on. This is the *Osprey*.”

“ We couldn’t have named her better,” said Alec, “ for we are fish-hawks ourselves, to-day. That is, we are shell-fish hawks.”

Elsa had often been aboard the boat before, but again she examined the craft carefully, for she had long wanted her father to get a similar boat.

“ Oh, good!” she exclaimed, when she caught sight of Alec’s wireless instruments, packed away in the box. “ If you ever happened to be out overnight, we could talk to each other in the evening and I could know how the work progresses.”

“ I expect to be out all the time until I get my work done,” replied Alec. “ There is so much to be done and so little time to do it in.”

“ Won’t I see you all this summer?” cried Elsa, and the look of real disappointment on her face made Alec happy.

“ Yes. I shall come home at the end of each week. Perhaps it won’t take me as long to do this work as I had expected. Why, do you know, I’ve found out a tremendous lot about the currents and eddies and tides, just from talking to Captain Bagley. And I had expected to have all that to learn by myself. And I’ve been studying the captain’s map of the oyster-beds, and that has made my work easier, too. So much of the bottom is already leased, that there isn’t any use fooling around to try to find out much about the grounds already

staked out. What I've got to do is to find out the best spots in the areas not yet staked."

"I don't agree with you at all," said Elsa. "What you want to know is the whole truth, not part of the truth."

"But I can never hope to own land that is already staked out. Why, a good bed costs thousands and thousands of dollars."

"Alec Cunningham," protested Elsa, trying to look severe, "you make me so mad I could beat you. For a boy with so much energy and brains, you say and do the most foolish things I ever heard. Now think over what you've just been saying. Here you are working like a steam-engine, day and night, to become an oyster-planter. You ought to know that if you keep on this way, you'll get there sure. Everybody else knows it. And yet you turn around and say you'll have to take the leavings, instead of planning to take your pick. And you're going to find out half the truth instead of the whole truth, and so cripple yourself. Isn't that enough to make anybody mad at you?"

"But," expostulated Alec, "even if I do become a planter, I've got to take what I can get."

"Of course you do. But there are more ways than one of getting a thing done, aren't there? You've got this boat now, haven't you? You don't own her, but, for the time being, she's yours. It might be the same with an oyster-bed. My father often rents other men's beds, or works them on shares, or buys the oysters in them. Some day you

may want to do the same thing. What you need to do is to know all the truth about these oyster grounds. It isn't worth while to do half of a job. And that isn't the kind of work you do, either. I know something about you, Alec Cunningham. You've got no end of brains and energy, but your judgment isn't always good. You need a guardian."

Both Elsa and Alec laughed heartily at the idea; then Alec's face grew sober. "I'm beginning to realize that that isn't any joke," he said. "I think it's because I haven't had any one to talk things over with. It's pretty hard for a fellow to decide things right all by himself every time." Then he smiled again, as he added, "I think it will be all right hereafter, for now I do seem to have a guardian."

Elsa's face grew scarlet. "Oh! Alec," she cried, "I don't want you to think I meant what I said—that is, not in the way it sounded. And if you don't take back what you just said, I'll never talk to you again."

"I'll take it all back," said Alec, "just as Galileo took back his assertion about the earth's turning round."

"How was that?" demanded Elsa.

"That's for you to find out," laughed Alec, and he would not tell her.

Soon they were in the open Bay. "Even if I do need to study all the oyster grounds," said Alec, "I'm going to begin on the unstaked areas."

"Of course. You may find grounds as good there as any in the Cove. Then you could get them direct from the state, at a minimum cost."

Alec spread out the map of the oyster-beds he had borrowed from Captain Bagley. "We'll begin here," he said, "and work straight offshore. Are you going to help me or just watch me?"

"Help you, of course. If I couldn't be of any more use than a phonograph, there wasn't much sense in my coming."

"Then suppose you take soundings and test with this salinometer. The instrument will give you the density of the water, and the thermometer in the bulb will register the temperature. I've made several copies of this map of the oyster-beds, and we'll mark our position with a cross and write down beside it whatever we find. While you are doing that, I'll be testing for larvæ."

Elsa took the sounding-line and dropped the lead into the waves, the line paying out over her finger. When the lead came to rest on the bottom, she noted the depth on the line. Then she took Alec's fountain pen and set down the depth beside the cross Alec had made on the map.

"Just date it, too," said Alec, "and note down the stage of both wind and tide. It's pretty well toward ebb now, and, if the book is right, we oughtn't to expect to find many larvæ. They seem to drop down to the bottom and anchor themselves during the ebb-tide to avoid being swept out to sea. They come up when the tide turns, and we

ought to find more in the flood-tide than in the ebb."

Alec, all this time, was getting ready for his part of the work. He took a galvanized bucket that belonged on the *Osprey* and lowered it overboard for a few moments so it would take on the temperature of the Bay. Then he lifted it aboard, brimming with water, and set it in the shade. Elsa thrust the salinometer and testing tube into the bucket to cool. Then Alec attached his hose to his lift pump, and carefully lowering the hose to a point within a few inches of the bottom, pumped his own bucket, which had also been cooling in the waves, full of water. It was the sample from the bottom, in which the oysters actually lie, that he wanted to test.

Elsa drew her tube and salinometer out of the cooling bucket, and Alec filled the tube with water from his own bucket. Elsa lowered the salinometer into it and put the tube in the shade. Then she held the bolting-cloth net over a tub, while Alec slowly emptied his bucket of water from the bottom into it. The bucket contained ten quarts and Alec had it brimming full. Gradually the water filtered through the net into the tub, leaving on the inside of the net whatever sediment had been in the water. In this sediment Alec expected to find the oyster larvæ. Ten times they did this, until they had strained one hundred quarts of water through the net. From time to time Alec threw the filtered water overboard. Finally the net was lifted clear

of the tub and the last of the water allowed to filter through it. While Elsa held the net up, Alec washed the sediment from the sides down into the tip of the net, with water dipped from the tub. When the filtering process was fully completed, and the sediment all concentrated in the tip of the net, Alec carefully untied the draw string, opening the end of the net, and, using his large rubber bulb pipette, washed the sediment into one of his wide-mouthed settling bottles.

Now Elsa turned her attention to her salinometer. It was intended to register the density or degree of saltiness of the water. Alec could hardly restrain his impatience, so eager was he to see what the instrument would tell.

"You know, Elsa," he said, "that sometimes the best seed grounds are in waters of so low a density as to be entirely unsuitable for fattening or even growing oysters. I've been thinking about that a whole lot, for most of the oysters we dredged on the *Bertha B* this year were very poor. They hadn't fattened a bit. Captain Bagley said he never had caught any good oysters in that bed. I've just been wondering if the water wasn't of the proper density. Why, those oysters would have been worth a whole lot more if they had been fat."

Elsa lifted the salinometer from the tube. "The water ought not to be very dense here," said Alec, "for we're so near the shore and it's near the end of the ebb-tide. There's fresh water pouring in all the time from the tributaries."

They found, as Alec had surmised, a low degree of density. The reading of the thermometer was also low. "That's what I expected, too," commented Alec. "This has been the coldest spring I can remember. I thought for a time that I was deceived because I was out in the wind so much, but the skipper said it really had been unusually cold this spring. I asked him the other day. It doesn't look as though we'd get much of a set this year. Why, that water is barely warm enough for oysters to spawn at all. And this water close to shore ought to be warmer than that farther out."

Elsa marked down on the chart the density and temperature.

"We forgot to make a note about the weather," said Alec. "Please add that, also."

"It's going to take a long, long time to make a complete job," sighed Alec, as Elsa noted down the weather. "I suppose I'll have to work at it for several summers."

"I suppose you'll have to work at it every summer," said Elsa, "if you intend to become a scientific oysterman. Don't you suppose conditions change from year to year in the oyster-beds? They must, for lots of times I've heard my father say he can't understand why the oysters in some given bed don't fatten some years. There must be changes from year to year. Whatever the reason was, I know his oysters have been poor enough this year. I heard him telling mother the other night that it had cost him hundreds of dollars because the

oysters in some of his beds hadn't fattened as they usually do."

From time to time Alec carefully lifted the settling bottle and examined it. By the time a quarter of an hour had elapsed he said, "That looks clear enough now to begin our count."

A distinct layer of sediment had fallen to the bottom of the bottle, while the water near the surface was quite clear. This upper layer of water Alec now carefully drew out with a pipette. The sediment became more and more concentrated. When Alec had removed all the water he dared, he washed the sediment into his graduated cylinder. Then, with a medicine dropper, he transferred a very small portion of the sediment to a watch crystal. Very gently, at the same time, he rotated the crystal in his hand, slightly agitating it. Gradually the sediment seemed to divide into two parts. About the edge of the liquid the lighter particles of mud and other impurities seemed to collect, while the heavier particles were concentrated in the centre of the glass. It was in this central deposit of sediment that Alec expected to find the oyster larvæ.

No wonder he was glad there was no glare of white paint to hurt his eyes, for the work before him was enough to try even the best of vision. The total amount of sediment in his watch crystal was so small that its entire surface could be seen at one glance through the microscope. And the oyster fry were presumably gathered in the tiniest of

spaces in the very centre of this tiny bit of sediment.

The actual counting of the larvæ might have troubled one unaccustomed to the use of the microscope; but Alec was at home with the instrument. He placed his watch crystal under the lens, adjusted the instrument to his own vision, and with one of his wooden-handled needles began to pick over the central windrow of debris. One by one he found and counted the oyster larvæ, or what he thought were larvæ. There was no question whatever about the largest larvæ. They possessed a reddish-purple hue that is found in the larvæ of no other bivalve. Also there was a distinct beak or bulge in the shell next to the hinge that he had read about in his bulletin. So he was sure of the identity of the larger oyster fry. But when it came to those more recently spawned, Alec could not be so sure. He knew that there was no certain way to distinguish between very young oyster and clam larvæ except by measuring them. This he was not equipped to do. Nor did it make any material difference whether Alec ascertained the exact number of larvæ in the water or not. What he was after was to find the relative quantities of larvæ in different places and at different times.

Under the microscope Alec found the oyster larvæ were a very beautiful sight indeed. The reddish-purple color was very similar in hue to the color of the muscle scar on the shell of an adult oyster. After the death of the oyster, Alec knew,

this vivid color rapidly disappeared. Elsa was as much pleased as Alec had been, when she looked through the microscope and saw the brilliant-hued oyster fry.

Little by little, Alec transferred the contents of the bottle to his watch crystal and counted the larvæ. He found only a few dozen in all. That did not surprise him for he had not expected to find many. The fact in itself meant very little until he learned whether other portions of the oyster grounds contained relatively more or fewer larvæ under similar conditions. That was what he most wanted to know—where the oyster fry collected, so he could do as the book suggested, and get his shells under them.

Now that he had started the work, Alec meant to keep at it until he found where the very greatest number of larvæ were concentrated, and then try to secure the ground beneath. If he found good beds unstaked, he could get them direct from the state. If some one else already had claim to them, he could work with a view to acquiring them at some future time. For the friendly scolding Elsa had given him had settled the matter in his own mind instantly. He wasn't going to do any half-way job.

Before noon, Alec had made tests in a number of places, working straight out from the shore as he had planned. That gave him a sort of cross-section of the bed, as it were. He decided that he would go over the same ground again at once to

see if the flood-tide made any difference in his count. For by this time the tide had almost finished running out.

At dinner time Alec and Elsa headed the *Osprey* for a little point of land near by. A tree growing back on the point offered shade. They managed to get ashore, though it bothered them to find a place where they could get near to firm ground with the tide so low. Then they fastened the *Osprey*, and made their way through the rank marsh growths, to the tree. They made a little fire, slung a coffee-pot over the blaze, and toasted some Wieners while the coffee was cooking.

After dinner they went back to the boat and resumed their work, making tests in exactly the same places they had tested in the forenoon. And in the flood-tide they found many more oyster fry than they had in the ebb.

"Looks as though there wasn't much use working on an ebb-tide," said Alec, "though, of course, I might find out after a while what the relative number is in the two tides. But there is a lot I can do in ebb-tide as well as in flood. I can take soundings just as well, and I can examine the bottles even better. I'm going to try to make a sort of topographical map of the bottom. It'll be a poor enough thing, at best, but it will help me to understand about the currents. Then I can examine the currents themselves at flood-tide for larvæ."

Their supper they ate on the *Osprey*. Then Alec hoisted the sail, and in the gentle breeze that

still blew, and with the incoming tide to carry them, they sailed silently and swiftly homeward through the sunset and the gathering dusk. Very different was the river from the stream as Alec had first seen it. Now hardly a boat was visible. They passed only one, *The Shark*, anchored apparently for the night.

"Elsa," said Alec, as they neared the harbor, "it has been a wonderful day. It has meant everything to me. It will make my whole summer happier. I see clearly enough that this job is going to become mighty tedious. But the remembrance of this day will help me to stick to it, even if I do have to work alone."

"You won't be so much alone as you think," replied Elsa. "You have your wireless, and we can call each other every noon and night. We can talk in the early evening and after Arlington sends out the time and the weather news. If you are going to be out on the water so much, you will want to get the weather forecasts, sure. It makes me nervous to think of you all alone out on the Bay. All sorts of things might happen to you."

"Nonsense," replied Alec. "I'll be as safe and snug as a bug in a rug."

"I hope so. But when I think of you all alone out on that great expanse of water, it makes me shiver. You might be caught in a big storm, or pirates might rob you."

"I thought you had such good judgment," taunted Alec. "Now listen to you."

“That’s the very reason I’m cautioning you. Besides, who has a better right to do so than your guardian?”

They both laughed at the joke, then Elsa said: “When we talk to each other, let’s telegraph. It takes longer, but not so many people can understand what we say. Since you installed our wireless telephone, everybody in the neighborhood has been getting one.”

“All right, we’ll telegraph. I’ll call you up as soon as Arlington is done sending. Then you’ll know that the bogey man hasn’t got me yet. But seriously, Elsa, there isn’t a particle of danger. Now I must hustle back to the *Osprey* or I may not get my wireless rigged up in time.”

Could Alec have seen ahead through the darkness that was fast enfolding the world, he would not have felt so sure about the absence of danger. Once before he had thought himself safe when death stalked close to his heels.

CHAPTER XVIII

A LONG CHASE

NOT until Alec said good night to Elsa and started back to the *Osprey*, did he realize how dark it was becoming. He had ridden all the way home with Elsa in her car, despite her protest that it wasn't necessary. But he left her at her door and started back at top speed. He had just missed a trolley-car, and there would not be another for an hour. If he hurried, he could walk back as soon as the next trolley-car could get him there. So he tramped rapidly along. He could distinguish the light, sandy road, but that was about all he could see.

Alec had moored the *Osprey* at a little float some distance from the pier shed. It was much easier to get on this float from a tiny boat like the *Osprey* than it would have been to crawl up to the piers. The float itself was merely a small staging made of one or two large timbers with planks nailed across them to form a walk. This plank walk was only a few inches above the tide. So it was perfectly easy for Elsa to step out on the float. From the float itself, a narrow walk made of single planks laid end to end, and supported on cross-beams

fastened to pilings driven in the mud, led upward from the river to the solid ground. A single rope, fastened along one side of this foot-bridge, was the only protection against falling off the planks.

Naturally Alec made his way with caution as he neared the river. The path to the little bridge led through the marsh reeds, which were head high. Alec could see hardly a thing and had to feel his way along with his feet. He blamed himself for his thoughtlessness in not bringing his bright carbide lamp, or at least slipping his flash-light into his pocket. Now he would have to be mighty careful or he would find himself in the water again. He had had quite enough experiences of this sort, so he went on with the greatest caution. Ahead of him he could occasionally hear a loud voice, that was instantly hushed. He went on until he reached the plank bridge, which he started to cross with the utmost care.

The instant he was fairly out of the reeds, he knew where the sounds of voices came from. Floating on the tide, close beside the plank bridge, was a tiny house-boat, or cabin, as the oystermen commonly called it. Alec knew that the cabin was occupied by a rough-looking man, named Frank Hawkins, who had a great scar across his cheek, and whom he had seen about the oyster wharves at times. Beyond the fact that Hawkins was a rather rough character, Alec knew little about the man. He had heard Captain Bagley say that the fellow never did an honest day's work in his life. But

Alec would have given small heed to this, had he not now distinctly caught the name "Cap'n Rumford."

Alec stopped as though he were shot. The sound came from within the little cabin, which Alec could now dimly distinguish, for faint rays of light shone through the cracks of the shuttered windows and under the door. The subdued hum of voices told Alec that several men must be inside the cabin. He wondered why they should have shut up the tiny house-boat so tight, as though this were a fierce winter night instead of a warm, July evening. And he wondered why they should be eating at this hour, for the smell of cooking came plainly to his nose.

For some moments Alec stood motionless, straining his ears to catch what was said within the cabin. Suddenly it occurred to him that he was eavesdropping. He started to move on, when again the same rough voice that had said "Cap'n Rumford," boomed out, "We can get ten thousand bushels." The rest of the sentence was drowned in a babel of protests. "Shut up! Don't talk so loud!" cried half a dozen voices angrily. Then the voices sank down to a murmur again.

Instantly Alec realized that something evil was afoot. What did all this mean? Why should these men be whispering together in a tightly closed cabin? They could get ten thousand bushels of what? That was easy to guess. Ten thousand bushels of oysters, of course. That was all anybody at Bivalve ever thought about—oysters. But why

should they be getting oysters now, in July? They couldn't sell them. What would they do with them?

Then it came to Alec like a flash. They must mean seed-oysters. There would be a ready sale for them, even in July. Of course everybody would know the seed had been taken illegally, as the state beds were closed at the end of June. But there were some oystermen dishonest enough to buy them for all that. Immediately there came into Alec's mind the thought of his first morning on the *Bertha B* and the remembrance of the oyster-boat that had fouled her. Distinctly he recalled Captain Bagley's statement about Captain Hardy: "That fellow ought to be doing time in Trenton. He's always up to something crooked. The last time they caught him he was dredging illegally in the natural beds. He got off with a fine but I reckon the next time he gets caught in any crooked business, he'll go to prison."

Once more the voices in the cabin grew loud. "I tell you I know. I've been pumping old Flint. He planted more'n a thousand bushels to the acre." Again the great, booming voice was stilled by warning cries within the cabin. "Shut up! Do you want to get us all in trouble!"

Alec heard a door open. Quick as a flash he knelt on the narrow plank and crouched as low as he could. A shaft of light shot athwart the darkness, though fortunately it did not fall on him. A head was poked out into the night. "Nobody

round," said a voice, as the head disappeared and the door was slammed shut again.

Alec waited to hear no more. The instant the hum of voices again arose within the cabin, he tiptoed down the plank bridge to the *Osprey*, cast off his lines, and picking up an oar, sculled rapidly away from the float. He had heard all he needed to hear, and seen more than was good for his peace of mind. The head that had been thrust out into the night was that of Jim Wallace, the very shell collector who had tried to buy Alec's rattlers, and who had threatened him with harm. And though he had not seen him, Alec was no less certain that the loud-voiced man in the cabin was Captain Tom Hardy. The voice that came booming out of the cabin was surely the voice Alec had heard that first morning on the *Bertha B*.

Nor could there be any greater uncertainty about the meaning of Captain Hardy's statement concerning the oysters. Captain Flint was the skipper of one of the Rumford boats. Alec knew that he had made a heavy planting on a new bed. Captain Flint was a good sailor and a capable oysterman, but he had one failing. He liked to boast. Evidently Captain Hardy had craftily drawn him out and had discovered what a thick planting Captain Flint had made. The temptation was too great for the crooked oysterman. He knew for sure that he could get ten thousand bushels of good seed-oysters in one little bed, and get them very easily. Now he was evidently laying plans to do it.

Alec's sole thought in driving the *Osprey* out into the river was to get away. He knew very well that if the lawless men in the cabin should lay hands on him in the dark, and particularly if they suspected that he had overheard any of their conversation, it would go hard with him. They might even murder him. So he drove his little craft through the water as fast as he could scull her.

But when he had put some hundreds of feet between himself and the river bank, and no longer feared immediate harm, he began to think the situation over calmly. He had no doubt that Hardy and his pals were planning to steal the seed-oysters from Captain Rumford's newest bed. But whether or not they meant to dredge them at once, Alec did not know. Now he wished that he had not come away so hastily. If only he had remained a little longer, he might have learned all about the plans the thieves were making. He was almost tempted to go back and listen again. He stopped sculling. Then his better judgment told him that it would be foolish to take a chance like that. This time the thieves *might* discover him; and if they did, he had no doubt whatever that he would get badly hurt. He already knew all that it was necessary to know. All he needed to do now was to inform Captain Rumford and to keep watch on Hardy's boat, the *Shark*. Alec smiled grimly as he thought how aptly she was named. Now he remembered that he had passed her on the way up the river. She lay at anchor some distance down-stream.

“ Moored her there so he could get away without being observed,” muttered Alec to himself.

Alec decided he would go ashore and telephone to the shipper, and then try to discover what the men in the cabin meant to do. He headed the *Osprey* toward the oyster wharves, but before he had gone a dozen yards, the door of the cabin was thrown open and Alec saw a number of men pass through the doorway. Then the door closed as suddenly as it had opened, and all was dark again. Presently splashing sounds in the water and the rattle of an oar told him that the men were getting into a boat. He had no doubt they would go straight to the *Shark*. He was directly in their path. There was only one thing to do—get away as fast as he could.

Once more Alec swung the *Osprey* round. She was so much larger and heavier than the ordinary yawl boat that he could not scull her very fast. He headed straight for the farther bank of the river, his heart beating fast as he listened for sounds of possible pursuit. But no noise broke the stillness and Alec knew that he was undiscovered. He went on. Occasionally he heard a low voice in the darkness, and now he was certain that the men in the boat were heading for the *Shark*.

When Alec reached the farther bank of the river, he rested on his oar and tried to think what he ought to do. He knew that he ought to talk with Captain Rumford the very first thing. But now he did not want to go to the pier lest he lose track of the men

in the yawl. They might board the *Shark* and sail away while he was in the office telephoning. Then he thought of his wireless. Maybe he could get into communication with Elsa at once, and if he could not, he certainly could a little later. Instantly his decision was taken. He would stay in the *Osprey* and try to watch the oyster thieves.

At once Alec began to string up his instruments. Practically they were already wired together; for he had removed the little shelf bodily from the *Bertha B* and put it in the box without detaching the instruments from it. He would have to attach the battery again and rig up an aerial. Immediately Alec fastened the *Osprey* to a near-by piling. Then he covered the windows of his little cabin so no light could shine out. Finally he entered the cabin and closed the companionway tight. Then he lighted a lamp. In a few minutes he had the shelf with his instruments securely mounted where it could remain. He fastened the battery under a bunk and connected it with the instruments on the shelf. He decided that temporarily he would run his lead-in wire through the doorway. He would fix it permanently when daylight came. So he attached the lead-in wire to the single strand of uninsulated wire he meant to use for his aerial. Then tucking his flash-light and his pliers in his pocket, he extinguished his lamp, opened the cabin door, and went on deck. Attaching one end of his aerial to a halyard, he hoisted it nearly to the top of his mast. Then he fastened the lower end to the tiny

bowsprit, so that the wire hung almost parallel with the jib stay. It wasn't much of an aerial, but Alec knew it would answer perfectly well for the work he meant to do with it.

He went inside the cabin and tested the outfit. It worked perfectly. He flashed his light on the cabin clock. It was not yet nine o'clock. He made ready to call the shipper on the wireless telephone, then decided he wouldn't. There really was nothing definite that he could tell him. He could merely communicate his suspicions. After all, Captain Hardy might not be going to rob the oyster-bed. If he alarmed the shipper needlessly, the shipper wouldn't think much of his judgment in future. Alec decided he would try to learn something more before communicating with the shipper. At least he could keep a watch on the *Shark*.

Alec cast loose from the piling and made his way down the river. He hugged the shore, for he knew that his little boat could never be seen if he kept close to the tall reeds that grew in dense masses along the bank. There was enough wind blowing to drive the *Osprey* at a good pace, but Alec dared not hoist his sail. So he sculled the boat slowly along, ever on the alert. He knew that the *Shark* was anchored in the second reach. But he was well through this reach before he could make up his mind whether the oyster-boat still lay there or not. So dark was the night that he could see absolutely nothing of her. Suddenly he heard a great voice bawling profanely at some one, and he knew the

Shark was still there. Quickly came the creak of tackle-blocks. The sail was going up. Then he heard the clanking of a capstan, though evidently the sound had been muffled in some way. But it told him all he needed to know. The *Shark* was lifting her anchor. She was going to sail. Was she heading for the oyster grounds?

For a single moment Alec hesitated. Then, "I'll do it!" he muttered between clenched teeth, and he stepped to the halyards and cautiously hoisted his own sail. "If I can't see their big sail," he reasoned, "they surely can't see my little one." Then he went back to the cockpit, took the tiller in his hand and started in pursuit of the oyster pirates.

From time to time he could hear sounds on the boat ahead of him, but gradually these grew so faint that he knew the *Shark* was outdistancing him. So he drew away from the bank and stood out boldly into the middle of the river. As yet he had caught not a single glimpse of the *Shark*, and he knew his own presence was utterly unsuspected. But the men on the *Shark* were sharp-eyed and it would not take them long to discover him if the night grew lighter. And to Alec it seemed as though it were becoming lighter. Perhaps that was because his eyes were growing so accustomed to the dark. He did not like to think what might happen to him if he fell into the hands of these men, so far away from any other human beings. If they should harm him—he did not like even to think of the word murder—he might never be able to warn the shipper

about the intended theft of his oysters. Now Alec saw that he had been unwise in trying to trail these desperate men without first telling the shipper.

"I'll call him at once," said Alec. And again he hesitated. "What shall I tell him?" he asked himself. "Wouldn't the captain be angry if I got him out here and this proved to be only a wild-goose chase? I'll just wait until I have something definite to tell him."

On he drove down the river. Afar off winked the range-lights. Off his port bow East Point Light was gleaming. But no other lights of any sort shone through the darkness ahead of him. No ship of any kind was riding the waves before him except the pirate *Shark*—unless other ships, too, might be running illegally without lights, endangering both themselves and all other craft, even as Alec himself was doing. But there were worse dangers than collisions to think of now, and Alec bent his entire attention to the problem of locating the *Shark*.

Unmistakably now he saw the cloud-rack above was becoming thinner. Once, for a single moment, he caught the gleam of a star. Then it vanished instantly. On went the *Osprey*. Only with the greatest difficulty could Alec make out the bank of the stream. Yet he managed to keep in the current and avoid running aground.

Presently Alec knew by the action of the boat that he was coming into the broad estuary of the river. The *Osprey* began to heave just the

slightest bit. From the position of East Point Light Alec judged he must be about over the bar. Ahead of him now lay only leagues and leagues of tossing water. Gone was the protection of the reedy banks. He would have to look sharp now if he was to escape detection.

Hardly had the thought entered Alec's mind, when for a single instant he was certain he saw the *Shark*. Something white loomed ahead of him, then the darkness swallowed it up again. But Alec had no doubt it was the *Shark*. Glad, indeed, was Alec now that the *Osprey* was painted a leaden gray. "If only my sail was gray, too," thought Alec. "Fortunately it's so old and dirty that it's almost gray. I don't believe they'll ever see me."

He wondered what time it was. Stepping inside the cabin, he flashed his light for a second on the clock. "Almost ten," he muttered. "I must get ready to talk with Elsa."

He stepped forward and dropped his little anchor. Then he let the *Osprey* swing round until she was headed into the wind and tugging smartly at her anchor cable. The sail flapped gently in the breeze. Alec looked sharply toward every quarter of the compass, and seeing nothing alarming, went into the cabin and sat down at his instrument.

Arlington was just sending out the time when he got his receivers adjusted. He did not waste a second but began calling Elsa.

"3ARM—3ARM—3ARM de 3ADH—3ADH—3ADH," he flashed. Almost immediately came

the answer. "3ADH — 3ADH — 3ADH de 3ARM—3ARM—3ARM—K."

Alec heaved a sigh that was close to a sob. Until this instant he had not realized what a strain he was under. He had been as tense as a fiddle string. Now it seemed as though a hand had reached out through the darkness and grasped his own. Fresh courage came to him. With steady fingers he ticked off his message.

"Aboard the *Osprey*—off East Point Light—tell your father I overheard plan to steal seed from his new bed. Believe Captain Tom Hardy, Jim Wallace, Frank Hawkins, and others unknown to me in the gang. They went aboard the *Shark* and are heading out toward the oyster-beds. I followed in the *Osprey*. So dark I can't see *Shark*. Will follow and let you know if they dredge. Will you stand by? May need you."

"Father! father!" almost shrieked Elsa in her excitement, forgetting to answer the message. "Come quick!"

Captain Rumford came running. "Oh! Father," said Elsa, "Tom Hardy and Jim Wallace and Frank Hawkins and some other men Alec doesn't know are going out to your new bed in the *Shark* to steal the seed you planted there. Alec overheard them and followed in the *Osprey*. He's going to watch and tell us if they dredge any oysters."

"What?" bellowed the oyster shipper. "The fool followed them! They'll murder him. Tell

him to come back this instant!" And the oyster shipper darted out of the room.

With a gasp of fear Elsa turned to her instrument. "Alec, come back," she rapped out frantically.

"What does your father want me to do?" asked Alec, disregarding her plea.

"Come back," she answered. "He's gone."

But Alec did not understand that it was the shipper who wanted him to come back. "I can't come back now," he flashed. "But I will the minute I get the evidence we need. Good-bye, and please stand by."

"Alec," came the answer, "please come back. Your guardian commands you to come back."

"I've got to save your father's oysters," flashed Alec. "Please stand by."

"I'll stand by until I know you are safe. Please, please, come back."

There was no answer, and Elsa knew that her comrade was sailing out into the darkness, possibly to his death. With clenched hands and chalky face she sat tense, listening, listening, listening, but no word came singing in her ears. She could only sit and hope—and fear.

Out on the black waters of the Bay, meantime, Alec was driving his little vessel hot on the heels of the oyster pirates. With the utmost caution he lifted and stowed his anchor, swung his boat, and let his sheet pay out. Then, taking his bearings from the flashing lights, he headed straight for the

new bed. Again and again he searched the horizon, but at first no slightest glimpse of the *Shark* rewarded his efforts. From time to time he cast an eye upward, studying the clouds. Now he was certain they were becoming thinner. About the water itself there seemed to be a faintly luminous quality. Alec had no fear it would betray the position of his little craft, however, for in color it was hardly distinguishable from the waves. It was his sail alone that he feared.

On he went. Mile after mile, the little *Osprey* followed the *Shark*. Now Alec was able to catch an occasional glimpse of the pirate ship. But these glimpses were so fleeting, so vague and uncertain, that had he not been straining his eyes to discover just what he saw, he would never have guessed that he was looking at a ship. There was a whitish, luminous patch that stood out for a second, then vanished again in the dark. But it was enough to tell Alec all he needed to know.

On they went. Minute followed minute. And to Alec a minute seemed like ten. For every minute took him farther from land, farther from help, nearer to danger. He was tense as a drumhead, his nerves were strung to the tightest notch, his senses fairly aquiver. He began to wish he had heeded Elsa's plea to return. But now his very pride would not let him go back. He had committed himself. He would see the thing through.

Now he felt certain the new bed must be near. He must lessen his speed or he might run too close

to the raiders and be seen. He was in a quandary. He dared not lower his sail. He did not want to tack. He was running straight before the wind, directly in the wake of the *Shark*. He knew that by the yeasty track in the water. But he must do something to lessen his speed. He hauled in his sail so that it began to flap. He was afraid the noise might betray him or his canvas be rent by a sudden gust. So he paid out his rope enough to keep his sail steady, and went on.

His speed fell off. It was time it did, too, for almost immediately he heard a splashing in the water and the rattle of chains as they paid out over iron rollers. The *Shark* was dredging! And she was near at hand. Nearer than Alec had imagined, too near for safety should the night grow any lighter. For now Alec could faintly see the big ship. If only he knew that she was dredging in the shipper's bed, he could tack and run for port. But he did not know. He did not want to go back until he had his evidence complete. How to get it, he did not for the moment know. One thing was sure: he didn't dare go any closer to the *Shark*. He would lie to and watch. He ran forward and dropped his anchor. Then very cautiously he lowered his sail. Now he felt safe from observation as long as it continued dark. He would wait for an opportunity to learn what beds the *Shark* was dredging.

But there was one thing Alec had not reckoned on. That was the powerful night-glass in the hands

of Thomas Hardy. Again and again the wary skipper swept the horizon with his glass. Once he had caught the faint gleam of the *Osprey's* sail; but the darkness instantly blotted it out again, and he had thought nothing of it. Now it was unmistakably lighter. As the hawk-eyed pirate manoeuvred his ship back and forth, he kept a watchful gaze shoreward, again and again sweeping the waters with his glass. And in one of these searches, he discovered the *Osprey*. With a startled oath he centred his gaze on the little craft. Then he ordered the dredges reeled in. The instant they were aboard, he swung the ship, and bore down on the *Osprey*.

All this happened so suddenly that Alec was caught unaware. Had he known what was coming, so that he could get his sail up, he might have run into the wind and outdistanced the *Shark*, for the *Osprey* was a wonderful sailor to windward. But the *Shark* was half-way toward him before Alec really knew what was happening. Then it was too late. There was nothing to do but await capture and make the best of it.

There was still time to say good-bye to Elsa, however. Alec darted into the cabin, threw over his switch, and flashed out a call.

"3ARM de3ADH," he signalled, trying to quiet his pounding heart and steady his trembling hand.

"3ADH de 3ARM—K," came back the instant response.

"They have discovered me," flashed Alec.

“*Shark* is bearing down on the *Osprey*. I hear them hailing. Tell your father to hurry. Good-bye—guardian.”

White-faced, aquiver with fear, Elsa flashed back a reply and waited. But no answer came ringing in her ears. For out in the lawless darkness of the Bay, the *Shark* had swung to, a dark figure had leaped to the deck of the *Osprey*, a light had flashed in his cabin, revealing Alec's identity, and he had been dragged roughly to the deck of his little ship. With furious curses he had been flung aboard the *Shark*.

“Kill him! Throw him overboard! Hang the spy!” cried the angry crew, and the lawless Hawkins had dealt him a furious blow with his fist, felling Alec to the deck.

He knew that he must act at once if he was to save his life. Trembling with fear, he sprang to his feet. The shell gatherer, Wallace, leaped toward him.

“If you lay a hand on me,” cried Alec, trying his best to appear courageous, “you'll go to prison for it.”

At the word prison, the pirate captain stepped forward. “I reckon we'll go to prison if we don't,” he bawled, in his awful voice. “We've got to put him out of the road, boys.”

“Captain Rumford knows I'm here,” said Alec desperately. “He'll be here himself pretty soon with some men you won't want to see. He's on the way now. I've been talking to him by wireless.”

Alec did not know that the captain was coming to his rescue. But it was his only chance to save his life. He must carry the bluff through.

"You're a liar," shrieked Captain Hardy.

"I tell the truth. Didn't you find me at my wireless?"

"Did you?" roared the captain, turning to the sailor who had dragged Alec from his cabin.

"He was working at some sort of an outfit. It might have been a wireless for all I know."

"Hell!" roared the skipper.

He leveled his glasses. Afar off a glow of light became visible. The party on the deck of the *Shark* watched it breathlessly. It came on and on. Suddenly a great beam of light shot through the darkness, and moved slowly across the water. A searchlight was sweeping the night.

"It's the *Dianthus*," roared the pirate skipper. "Our goose is cooked." With sudden fury he turned upon Alec. "It'll be state's prison for mine," he roared, "but before I go I'll fix you. You'll never spy on another man."

He leaped toward Alec. The lad shrank back in terror. He believed the desperate oysterman meant to kill him instantly. Still he kept a grip upon himself.

"If you harm me," he cried sternly, "it will be more than state's prison for you. It'll be the electric chair."

At that instant the search-light of the *Dianthus* was turned fairly on the pirate ship. The little

group on her deck stood out like actors in a spot light.

“Hell!” roared the infuriated Hardy again, as he stepped back from Alec, his features working convulsively as he gazed in impotent rage at the oncoming guard-boat.

In a few minutes more the *Dianthus* ran alongside, and armed men came swarming over the side of the *Shark*. At their head were Captain Rumford and big Jim Hawley.

CHAPTER XIX

HOME AGAIN

WITH a bound, big Jim Hawley was at Alec's side. "Did they hurt you, lad?" he cried.

"Not much," replied Alec, "but I guess they would have killed me if you hadn't come."

Alec turned partly away to watch what was doing. The light fell on his face so that the raw, red mark from the blow, now rapidly turning black, stood out plainly.

"Who did that?" demanded Hawley.

"Hawkins."

"Jim!" rang out Captain Rumford's voice, as Hawley leaped toward the cowering bully. Hawley stopped in his tracks. "We've had enough violence already. Let him alone."

The shipper turned to the commander of the *Dianthus*. "You wanted evidence before you would make an arrest," he said. "Here's your evidence." He pointed toward the pile of seed-oysters on the deck of the *Shark*. Then he faced Alec. "You saw them dredged, did you not?"

"Yes, sir. They came out of the bed just to starboard, sir."

Again the shipper faced the captain of the *Dianthus*. "That's my bed and these are my

oysters. I charge these men with theft and also with assault and battery on this lad."

"You are under arrest," said the guardsman to the crew of the *Shark*, "and we will shoot at the slightest attempt at resistance." He turned to his men. "Search them," he commanded.

A revolver and an ugly dirk were found on Hardy. Wallace had some brass knuckles in his pocket. The others were not armed.

"We'll just add a charge of carrying concealed weapons when these two are arraigned," said the captain of the *Dianthus*.

"You'll have to watch them," said Captain Rumford. "They're a desperate lot. They won't go to prison without a struggle."

"We won't take any chances with them," said the captain of the guard-boat. "Get your irons, men."

The guardsmen produced handcuffs and in another moment Hardy and his band of desperadoes were securely shackled. Then they were taken aboard the guard-ship.

"We'll bring the *Shark* in," said the shipper. "You take care of your passengers."

"Hoist the sailing lights," said the shipper, as the *Dianthus* moved away into the darkness.

Alec pulled out his flash-light and hunted about in the *Shark's* cabin until he found her lanterns. He lighted them. While Jim Hawley hoisted the white light aloft, Alec was fastening the red and green lights in the rigging.

"Now make the *Osprey* fast astern," ordered the shipper.

Alec leaped aboard the little craft and pushed her along the side of the *Shark*, while Hawley pulled on a rope from her bow. In a moment the *Osprey* floated astern and Alec was back on the *Shark*.

"Haul those sheets a bit tighter," called the shipper.

Alec and Hawley obeyed the command. The shipper twirled his wheel, the *Shark* slowly gathered headway, and in a moment was sailing briskly on the starboard tack.

"Now, you young rascal," said Captain Rumford, when the *Shark* was fairly under way, "tell me what all this means. Whatever led you to do such a foolhardy trick? You had us nearly scared to death. Didn't you know that those fellows are a desperate lot? It's God's mercy alone that prevented them from murdering you."

"I think your own arrival had a lot more to do with it," laughed Alec. Then his face grew very sober. "I think they really meant to kill me," he said. "I know they would at least have beaten me badly if the *Dianthus* hadn't appeared when she did."

"Tell us all about it," urged the shipper. "How did you ever learn that Hardy intended to raid my bed, and what in the world ever made you do such a foolish thing as to follow him all alone?"

Alec explained how he had overheard the con-

versation in the cabin. "You should have told me at once," said the shipper.

"I started to tell you," said Alec. "Then I was ashamed to bother you until I had something more definite to tell you. I was afraid you would think I was suffering from a bad imagination. So I decided to wait until I had something really definite. I followed the *Shark* out to the oyster-beds, keeping far enough back of her to escape discovery. At the mouth of the river I stopped and told Elsa where I was and what I was doing."

"It's a mighty good thing for you, lad, that you did. If you had waited half an hour longer, we might never have seen you again. You've had a narrower shave than you think, lad. The *Dianthus* just happened to be in the harbor. Her captain came up this afternoon to see me about some business matters. There wasn't another boat in the river that could have got to you anywhere near as quick. The minute Elsa told me what you were up to, I jumped in my car and raced over to Bivalve. The captain was just boarding a trolley-car to go away for the night. He didn't want to come. Said he could arrest the oyster thieves any time I had the evidence ready. I told him it wasn't a question of oysters but of your life and that he *had* to come. And you should have seen us come, lad. The captain crowded on everything he had. But what I don't understand is how you prevented those ruffians from murdering you, once they had you in their power."

"They were going to murder me," said Alec, his cheek paling at the memory of his danger. "I don't believe there's any doubt of it. But I bluffed them." And Alec related what had happened on the deck of the *Shark*. "If the *Dianthus* hadn't shown her light just when she did," he said soberly, "I don't believe I would be talking to you now."

"Watch that boom," cried the captain. "I'm going to come about."

Alec dodged as the boom swept across the deck. Suddenly he thought of Elsa, standing by at the wireless. "Oh, Captain!" he cried. "I must go aboard the *Osprey*. Elsa said she would stand by in case I needed to call her again."

"I reckon you'll have to talk to her, Alec," replied the shipper. "She was just scared to death when she got your message."

The captain swung the ship straight into the wind. The sails began to flap. The boat lost headway. Big Jim Hawley laid his hand on the *Osprey's* line and hauled the little craft close beside the *Shark*. Alec stepped aboard of her. Flashlight in hand, he made his way into the cabin and sat down at his instrument.

"3ARM—3ARM—3ARM de 3ADH—3ADH—3ADH," he signalled.

Instantly came the response.

"Everything O. K.," flashed Alec. "*Dianthus* arrived and took Hardy and his crew ashore. No difficulty. Nobody hurt. Your father, Jim, and I are bringing back the *Shark*. We're some dis-

tance off the bar now. *Dianthus* is already in the river. Don't know how to thank you for your help. I think you saved my life. Will tell you about it when I see you."

"I want to see you to-night," flashed back Elsa.

"Impossible," telegraphed Alec. "Won't be in until very late."

"I won't take no for an answer. You must come home with Dad. Say you will."

"Maybe he won't take me," signalled Alec.

"Tell him if he comes home without you I'll never forgive him."

Outside Alec heard the captain bawling, "Are you going to talk all night?"

"Good-bye," flashed Alec, and stepped out on deck. Then, "Aye, aye, sir," he called. "Be there as soon as I hoist this light." He lighted his lantern and ran it aloft. Then he climbed aboard the *Shark*.

"Your daughter ordered me to tell you, sir," he said, "that she'll never forgive you if you don't bring your wireless man home with you."

"Oh! She did, eh? I suppose the wireless man has no wishes in the matter himself!"

Alec blushed. "Captain Rumford," he said, "you know I like to come to your house whenever I properly can. It's more like home to me than any other place in the world."

"God bless you, lad!" said the shipper, his tone instantly changing. "We should have missed you sadly if anything had happened to you to-night."

You certainly shall go home with me and you shall spend the night there. I don't like the idea of your sleeping alone on that little boat, after what has happened. Remember now. You must watch like a hawk or somebody *will* get you. Hardy and his gang have lots of friends, and if they get a good chance they'll harm you. So be on your guard at all times and places."

"Thank you, sir," said Alec. "I don't think they'll catch me off my guard. I've had enough experience since I came to Bivalve to make a statue watchful."

Quickly the *Shark* gathered headway, and was soon bowling along toward her pier. "She's a nice stepper," said the shipper. "She's built for speed. I reckon old Hardy found speed useful in his business. But I guess he'll soon learn that slow but sure is a good motto after all. I think he'll make a pretty long visit to Trenton. And I don't believe he'll ever show his face around here again. He's done as an oysterman, at least at Bivalve."

Captain Rumford fell into a brown study. He was so deep in thought that he almost forgot what he was doing, which was something very unusual.

Presently Hawley spoke out of the darkness forward, where he was on watch. "Hadn't we better go about, Cap'n?" he said in a deep, quiet voice.

Captain Rumford woke up with a start, strained his eyes into the darkness, then twirled his wheel like mad. "Look out for the boom!" he said, then

added, with a laugh, "Wouldn't they have given me the laugh if I had laid the *Shark* up on the bank. And she'd have been there in about sixty seconds more."

The *Shark* wore away on the other tack, but Captain Rumford did not forget himself again. "Jim," he called presently.

"Aye, aye, sir," came the big sailor's response from the forepeak hatch where he was sitting.

"Come here a moment."

As the big sailor made his way aft, the shipper said, "Hawley, it kind of runs in my mind that you once had some sort of a claim to Hardy's oyster-beds. Am I right?"

"I owned them once," said Hawley.

"You owned them! Why, I never knew that. How'd Hardy come to get them?"

"You see, sir, I staked out them beds years ago when everybody else was plantin' in shallow water. You know them beds is out deep. Everybody laughed at me. Of course I never had no outfit to work 'em, but I figured that some day I might get a boat somehow. And then, too, I noticed that every year planters were putting seed farther out. I figured they'd reach my beds after a bit, and if I couldn't do anything more, I could at least get a few loads of shells down and maybe get a set of spat from the other beds. And I would, too, if I had kept hold of them beds. Why, Lord bless you! Look where they are now—right in the middle of the oyster-beds."

“ Why didn’t you hang on to them, Jim? ”

The big sailor hung his head. “ I got to drinkin’, Cap’n. You know how I used to hit it up. Hardy got me into a poker game, and when all my money was gone, I put up my oyster-beds and he got them, too. I reckon he had a crooked deck, too.”

“ I reckon you’re right. Everything about that fellow seems to have been crooked.”

For a time there was silence. The *Shark* sailed swiftly on. She was now well up the river. Soon the solitary light at Bivalve shone close at hand. Then the shipper laid the *Shark* skilfully alongside the pier. They bade good night to Hawley, and in another moment Alec and the shipper were bowling homeward in the captain’s motor-car. At least it seemed to Alec as though he were going home.

It seemed even more like home when the shipper threw open the door and ushered Alec into the big house. For his own mother and sister could hardly have given Alec a more cordial welcome than Mrs. Rumford and Elsa gave him. Despite that welcome Alec suddenly became self-conscious and bashful. He was embarrassed by the warmth of the greeting given him. Also he saw in Elsa’s eyes a light he had never seen there before. Had he but known it, a similar light was shining in his own eyes. His heart beat with strange and unaccustomed irregularity. More than once he flushed like a schoolgirl. He felt curiously awkward and at the same time unaccountably happy. Now he real-

ized that Elsa would never be the same to him in future as she had been in the past. His lonely vigil in the dark, his hour of supreme danger when only the hand of this girl comrade thrust out through the night had saved him from death, had revealed to him the inner meaning of the friendship that had sprung up between them.

A question arose in his mind, a question that seemed more important to him than anything else in the world. Yet he could not ask that question, and he knew it would be a long, long time before he dared. Still he did not need to ask any question to learn his answer. He could read it in Elsa's eyes. The hour of peril, when she had sat in mute apprehension, listening, listening, listening, breathless in her fear, had told Elsa also that she could never again think of Alec in the old way.

So, although Alec at first was unaccountably ill at ease, he was happier than he had ever been in his life. He was happy in what he saw in Elsa's eyes. He was also happy in the thought that he had been true to the shipper, that he had not betrayed the captain's confidence, that he had really saved his friend and benefactor from great loss. And that was no little thing for a lad still in his teens.

Of course time went by unobserved. Nobody at that Rumford household cared a farthing that night how fast the time went or how late it was. Once more Alec had to relate every incident in connection with his adventure, from the moment he left the Rumford house in the early evening to the moment

he returned to it after his rescue from the oyster pirates.

When all the story had been dragged from the reluctant lad, the shipper once more expressed his opinion of Alec's folly in wasting his time over the silly notion that a microscope and a thimbleful of sea water would tell him anything about the value for oyster-culture of a piece of land three fathoms under the waves. Instantly Elsa flew to Alec's defense.

"Now, father," she said, "Alec is doing just what he ought to do, and you ought to be the last person in the world to discourage him. He's going to find out the truth even if he doesn't find the oysters he hopes to, and that's worth a lot."

"Well, all he finds out won't begin to make up for the money he'll lose while he's finding it out," said the shipper dogmatically. "If there had really been anything to find out, don't you suppose we would have found it out in all these years? Why, I've been oystering thirty years and I never heard of such nonsense before. But I suppose boys will be boys. We all have to have our fling. Now that I know you're both so set on this foolishness I wouldn't say another word if it wasn't for this business to-night. Alec means to live aboard the *Osprey* most of the summer and I don't like the idea. Why, anybody can come aboard of her in the middle of the night and do anything he likes. We can't always be waiting on the wireless to get this youngster out of trouble. I tell you I don't like it."

At the mention of danger to Alec, Elsa's face went pale. Presently she fell into a brown study, from which she awoke only when she heard her father say, "For goodness sake! Look at the clock! We must be getting to bed."

He and Mrs. Rumford bustled off, after bidding Alec a hearty good night. "Now, don't you youngsters stay up any longer," said the captain, when Elsa lingered behind.

"We won't," said Elsa. Then she turned to Alec. "It makes me sick to think of you alone in the *Osprey* at night, now that you have had this trouble with Tom Hardy. Yet you mustn't quit your investigation, either, Alec. Won't you come home at night and sleep ashore?"

"I can't, Elsa. Think of all the time I should waste, sailing back and forth. I can never get over all the oyster grounds as it is. But I can do a great deal if I am right on the job all the time. And besides, I don't really believe there's any danger at all. That gang has had a lesson that will make them pretty careful. They have seen what wireless will do, and they can never be sure what I might do with it."

"You mustn't trust to the wireless, Alec. You must be on your guard all the time. If you insist upon sleeping in the *Osprey*, you must pass the nights where nobody can find you. I know a place where you can hide easily, where you couldn't be found in a week. To-morrow I'm going out to the Bay with you and show you the place. I shall feel

better about you when I know you are safe there at night. I wouldn't ever run in to the place until after dark. Then if you douse your light nobody can see where you go, and your hiding-place will never be known."

"Bully for you!" cried Alec. "I needed help to-morrow the worst way possible. I'm going to study old Hardy's oyster-beds, and I want to make the best job possible."

"Whenever you need help, Alec, don't hesitate to ask me. I'll help you whenever I can."

"Elsa," said Alec, his eyes shining, "nobody ever had a better friend than you have been to me. I owe my life to you. I can't tell you ——" He broke off short, afraid to say any more.

Just then a great voice boomed in the hallway. "Are you youngsters going to talk all night?"

"Good night," said Elsa. She held out her hand to Alec. And he was a surprisingly long time letting go of it.

CHAPTER XX

THE OSPREY'S NEST

DESPITE the late hour of retirement, the shipper's household was astir at the usual time next morning, and that was pretty early. The minute breakfast was eaten the shipper hurried away to superintend the overhauling of his boats, and Elsa and Alec drove to the oyster wharf, laden with a generous luncheon that Mrs. Rumford had packed for them.

"We'll need a setting-pole," said Elsa, as they were about to board the *Osprey*. "It will be necessary to push the boat into the little harbor I'm going to show you."

Alec borrowed a setting-pole and the two were soon afloat. The day promised to be hot. The sun had risen like a ball of fire. Hardly a cloud flecked the wide expanse of blue sky. But there was a fair breeze blowing, which promised to temper the heat. But neither Elsa nor Alec cared whether it was hot or cold. They were together, and they were engaged in a business of prime importance. Life had a zest that could have been found in no mere idle holiday.

With business of such importance to perform, they could not wait for the winds to carry them, but Alec started his motor and the *Osprey* went chugging swiftly toward the oyster grounds. About them rose a very sea of reeds and other marsh growths, now beautiful in their soft green, summer hues, and stretching level as a floor.

In a surprisingly short time the *Osprey* had crossed the bar and was fairly in the Bay. The gray-green water rolled so gently before the soft breath of the wind that the *Osprey* rose and fell hardly at all. Occasionally a little wave came slap! against the boat, sending a shower of spray aboard, but the occupants of the boat merely laughed when they were sprinkled.

Suddenly Alec bent forward and fastened his gaze on some distant object. Then, after a moment's study, "What do you suppose those white things are on those stakes?" he asked.

Elsa looked. "Pieces of white cloth," she said after some study.

Alec was puzzled. "You notice that all four corners of the bed are marked with white," he said.

The *Osprey* drew near to the marked stakes. Alec turned and faced landward. "I know what it means," he cried. "That's your father's new bed. It's right in line with both sets of landmarks. Those thieves must have marked the stakes sometime during the day, so that they could see the corners easily in the dark. It can't be very much farther to Tom Hardy's bed. Hawley told me

how to locate it. I reckon it'll be on the market before long. I want to have a good look at it."

Alec paused to think over Hawley's directions. "There!" he cried suddenly. "See that dead tree with the fish-hawk's nest in it? It's just in line with those three big oaks that stand by themselves. We're all right in that direction. Off here we ought to have a little clump of trees directly in line with the first range-light." He turned and studied the shore-line in the other direction. "There! Now we've got it exactly," he cried a moment later. "This must be Hardy's bed."

"There are some corner stakes," said Elsa. And after a moment's search, she added, "There is another corner."

Quickly they found a third corner, but the stakes that marked the fourth corner were missing entirely. "It doesn't matter," said Alec. "Three corners are just as good as four. This bed looks as though it were oblong and at least twice as wide as it is long. When he staked it out, I suppose Jim Hawley reckoned he could dredge faster if he could plow long furrows, as the farmers back home would say. It isn't a bad idea. I'll keep it in mind when I lay out my grounds. It's making so many turns that wastes time, whether you're dredging or plowing."

"What shall we do first?" said Elsa. "Let's get right to work."

"We'll take soundings," said Alec. "We'll make a few turns right across one end of the bed,

then try it lengthwise. We want to make a very thorough study of these grounds, for if Captain Hardy didn't steal his oysters, then he's got a very good bed."

From the cabin Alec brought a big sheet of paper, which he fastened to the cabin-top. On it he marked the positions of the four corner stakes. "This will give us plenty of room to make notes on," he said. "Later we can copy what we like on the map of the beds. I'll just put down the date and the state of the tide and the weather." He wrote on the paper and handed his pencil to Elsa. "I'll sound if you'll make the entries," he suggested.

"I can steer, too," said Elsa. She took the paper and sat down by the tiller.

Alec closed the throttle of the engine. The *Osprey* at once dropped to very low speed. Alec got his line ready, and lowered it. "Fifteen feet," he called. Elsa entered the figures on the temporary chart. A few fathoms away he cast the lead again. "Fourteen feet, nine inches," he called. A few rods farther along the line registered fifteen feet, one inch. So it went straight across the bed, the bottom being practically level.

"I'll make one more cast," said Alec. "Then you swing her to port and we'll cut right back across the bed again."

The *Osprey* was almost at the outer boundary of the grounds. Alec dropped his lead. "Hello!" he cried in surprise, as he watched the line. "Got

eighteen feet here! That's funny. Just keep her straight for a few rods. I want to see how wide this hole is." The depth continued constant at eighteen feet. "That's queer," commented Alec. "Bring her about. We'll see how it is a few fathoms farther down-stream."

Elsa brought the *Osprey* about as directed. "Still eighteen feet," said Alec, sounding repeatedly. They came to the boundary of Hardy's bed. "Eighteen feet," called Alec. Before Elsa could get it written down, he called again, "Fifteen feet." And eighteen feet it continued all the way across the bed.

Once more they came about and crossed the bed still farther down-stream. Again the lead showed fifteen feet, almost to the edge of the bed, when the line suddenly paid out an additional three feet.

"We'll just cover the entire bed this way," said Alec, "instead of running lengthwise as we had planned. It looks to me as though there is a regular trough in the bottom, running right along the edge of this bed. I'd like to know how wide and how long it is. I wonder what ever could have scooped out such a furrow in the mud."

They kept on, crossing and recrossing the oyster-bed, until they had sounded it from end to end. And at every trip across the bed they got practically the same figures—fifteen feet in Captain Hardy's grounds and eighteen along the edge.

"Do you know," said Alec, when he had finished sounding and had reeled up the line, "I once read

that the Hudson River can be followed to sea for three hundred miles. That is, there is a distinct furrow or channel in the ocean bottom leading straight from the mouth of the Hudson, as though something had come down that stream and gouged a great ditch in the ocean floor. I reckon it must have been done centuries ago by glacial ice or something of the sort. Anyway, it looks to me as though there is something like that ditch right here in the bottom of the Delaware Bay."

"I wonder what could have made it?" queried Elsa. "Would it make any difference in the oyster-beds along it?"

"By George!" cried Alec, suddenly afire with an idea. "It would make a thundering big slick, that's what it would do, and if my oyster bulletin is correct, that ought to be a prime place for larvæ." He began to examine the water carefully. "That's exactly what it does," he cried, after studying the water far and wide. "We're right in the slick now. It's so big we didn't notice it."

"I guess we were too busy talking to pay attention," suggested Elsa, "or we should have noticed it long ago."

"Well, I can hardly wait to test the water and see what we find," said Alec. "Conditions are just right this morning. The tide has about three feet to rise yet. There ought to be as many oyster fry swimming about now as there ever will be. We'll make as many tests as we can. And we won't strain out so much water as we did the other time."

It takes too long. If we test twenty-five quarts of water, that will give us enough to go on. Then we can make more tests."

Quickly Alec had his instruments ready and they began to strain water from the bottom through the bolting-cloth net. Then the sediment was washed into a bottle. While that was settling, they moved on to another spot and strained more water. So they continued until they had several bottles settling.

"Now you begin to count the larvæ," suggested Elsa. "The sediment has all settled in those bottles that we filled first. I will strain out more water while you are using the microscope."

As rapidly as he could, Alec got the sediment on his watch crystals and counted the larvæ. As long as he could hold himself to the trying task Alec continued with his eye to the microscope, picking over the crystalfuls of sediment with his little needles.

"The water's full of them," he cried at last, leaving his microscope. "It's been a mighty poor spawning season, with so much cold weather, though it's warm enough to-day. Yet right here there is no end to the spat. There are ten times as many larvæ here as we found in that ground we tested the other day. Why, that twenty-five quarts yielded 3,400 larvæ," and he picked up the bottle he had just emptied. "The bed's just swarming with spat."

He stepped to the engine and threw on more power. Then he took the tiller. "I want to test

a sample from that trough or ditch. And by the way, I'll just sound as we go."

He got out the sounding-line again, and Elsa steered the boat while Alec took soundings. Almost uniformly the depth continued at eighteen feet.

"We must have come five hundred yards," said Alec. "We'll try it here." He stopped the engine, and they strained twenty-five quarts of water from the bottom. When it had settled sufficiently, Alec worked the sediment out on a watch crystal. Then he began to count.

"Now what do you think of that!" he cried, when he had finished his count. "Only twenty-five larvæ I could be sure of in all that water! It's just as the book says. The fry are all collected in that slick. That bed of Hardy's must be one of the very best in the Bay. If only Jim still owned it!"

By this time it was long past the dinner hour, but the two had been so intent on their work that they had paid no attention to the time. Now, however, Alec suddenly awoke to the fact that he was ravenous. "I could eat a shark," he cried. "Let's go to the shore at once and have dinner."

He started the engine and they headed for the point where they had previously eaten. With the tide so well up, they had little difficulty in getting ashore. Alec gathered dry sticks and fixed the fireplace, while Elsa unpacked the basket Mrs. Rumford had given them. Among other things, there was a fine cut of beefsteak.

"Oh boy!" exclaimed Alec, when he saw it. "I'm so hungry I could eat it raw."

His fire was already ablaze. He let it burn down to coals, then added a few twigs at a time. Over this tiny flame Elsa cooked the steak in a little skillet. Alec, meantime, brought water from the *Osprey* and got the coffee ready to cook the instant the steak was done. He also placed a heavy blanket on the ground under the sheltering tree, and here they spread out all the good things Mrs. Rumford had given them. There were pickles and hard-boiled eggs, and sandwiches, and cakes, not to mention bread and butter and jelly, the steak and the coffee.

"Gracious!" said Alec, when the basket was at last empty. "Your mother must have thought she was packing lunch for a regiment."

"She has seen *boys* eat before," said Elsa mischievously.

"From which I infer," retorted Alec, "that you do not wish anything to eat yourself. It's just as well, for I think I can get away with all that steak myself. Please pass it over."

He took the frying-pan away from her, but it was only because the steak was cooked and he wanted to sling the coffee-pot over the fire.

Elsa looked distressed. "Aren't you going to give me any of that steak?" she cried in pretended consternation.

"I understand from your remarks that this was all intended for me," teased Alec.

"It will be first-degree murder if you don't give me some," said Elsa. "I'll surely die of starvation in a few minutes if I don't get something to eat."

At the word murder, the fun died out of Alec's eyes. "Please don't," he said, "not even in fun. That word murder has come to have a very ugly sound to me in the last twenty-four hours."

They were silent a moment. Then such a soft light crept into Elsa's eyes that Alec had to jump up and tend the fire to keep control of himself.

At last the meal was eaten. "I'm too full to do another stroke of work," said Alec.

"Then we'll go take a look at the little harbor I have picked out for you."

They poured water on the fire to make sure it was completely extinguished, then gathered up the remnants of the feast, and once more boarded the *Osprey*. For half a mile they chugged along the shore. Then they came abreast of a little clump of trees that rose some few hundred feet inland, apparently in the very heart of the marsh.

"There's your harbor," said Elsa, pointing to the tree clump.

"But how are we going to get to it?" demanded Alec, searching everywhere for an inlet.

"Wait until the largest two trees come in line," said Elsa. "Then go straight in."

Alec slowed down the *Osprey* and continued along the shore until the trees indicated were in line. Then he headed directly toward them. In the reeds

that lined the shore he noted a tiny opening, like the mouth of the merest tunnel; but it proved to be both wider and deeper than he would have believed. The reeds that choked the little channel bent to right and left as the *Osprey* slowly forged ahead, then swiftly righted themselves, forming a screen behind the boat. Had there been no mast in the *Osprey*, she would have been completely concealed before she had gone a hundred feet. The clump of trees stood not more than five hundred feet from the open water of the Bay. The little channel ran almost straight toward it. Alec shut off his engine and pushed the *Osprey* along with the setting-pole. The little boat slipped through the reeds as quietly as a floating duck. As they came near the trees, Alec saw that there were really two clumps of them standing close together on two tiny islands, with the tiniest little channel between them. Alec pushed the *Osprey* forward until it came to rest in this little channel, directly between the two islands. So narrow was this passage that he could almost have stepped ashore on either side of this boat.

"Now we are completely hidden," said Elsa. "The reeds hide the hull of the boat and the trees conceal the mast and rigging. A person out on the Bay could search this clump for an hour with the most powerful telescope and I doubt if he would ever discover there is a boat moored here. It's the finest little hiding-place I know of. It has one drawback, though. You can't get in and out when the tide is real low."

Alec gazed about him with delight. The snug little harbor made him think of a pirate's refuge. "It certainly is a bully hiding-place," he said, "though I suppose most of the old-timers here-about know of it."

"I very much doubt it," said Elsa.

"Then how did you come to know about it?"

"Found it myself," explained Elsa. "Dad left me to hunt ducks along the shore, while he put down some stakes in an oyster-bed near by. I wounded a duck that got away from me. It swam into this little channel and I followed it. That's how I came to discover this place. I don't believe many folks know about it, for I told Dad about it and he had never heard of it."

"Well, anyway, it makes no difference," said Alec. "I have no idea anybody is going to bother me, and if I slip in here after dark and don't show any lights, I don't think anybody would ever find me. What do you call the place?"

"I never named it," said Elsa.

"You didn't? It ought to have a name, sure. What shall we call it? We'll give it a name, and that will be a secret all our own."

"I know," cried Elsa. "We'll call this the *Osprey's Nest*."

"Fine! That's a dandy name. And it's such a good name for a secret hiding-place. If anybody heard us talking about it they would think we meant one of those old trees that have real fish-hawks' nests in them. When you hear the name

osprey's nest come buzzing in your receiver, you'll know I'm as safe and snug as can be. Why, just to tell you I'm at the osprey's nest would mean a whole lot, wouldn't it? And, by the way, you can spare a few moments now and then to talk with me with your wireless, can't you?"

"Alec!" said Elsa reproachfully. "When I shall hardly see you all summer! Of course, I'll talk to you. But I mustn't keep you from your work. You mustn't let me do that, Alec, for I want you to go on with it and make just the great success that I know you are going to."

"Well, when shall I call you? You won't always be at home, you know."

"I'll tell you what. I'll listen in at one o'clock and at seven, and when Arlington sends out the time, whenever I'm at home; and that will be most always."

"Thank you," said Alec. "It will be pretty lonely out here all by myself." He glanced at the clock in the cabin. "Whew!" he whistled. "Look at the time. We must be getting to work at once."

"All right. What shall we do first?"

"I ought to finish this work with the microscope. These larvæ ought to have a few drops of formaldehyde on them if they aren't counted pretty soon; and I haven't any. So I guess I'll go on with my counting."

"Then we might just as well stay here," said Elsa. "It's a good deal cooler here in the shade of

the trees than it would be out on the water. It's too bad there's nothing I can do to help you. Are you sure there's nothing I can do?"

Alec looked at his comrade steadily for a moment. "Elsa," he said, "did you ever read that beautiful poem of Milton's in which there is a line that says something like this: 'They also serve who only stand and wait'? You know the reserves are like that. They don't seem to be doing much, for a fact, but the fellows in the front line fight a heap sight better just because they know their comrades are back there, ready to aid them when necessary. So I wouldn't say anything more about not being of use. You know it's been pretty tough going for me these last few months since Dad died and I had nobody to fall back on. I can't tell you what it means to me to have your friendship and that of your father and mother."

"Thank you, Alec," said Elsa. "That's a very fine thing to say. I never thought of the matter in just that way before. You know I really do want to help you, and I don't care whether I help by really assisting in your work or merely by being with you, now that you put it in that way. The point is to get the work done. Oh! I think so much is going to come of all this that I am as eager as can be to get the work finished. Now you attend to your microscope and I'll amuse myself with your wireless."

For a long time there was silence on the *Osprey*. Elsa sat with the receivers strapped to her ears, now

shifting the coupler, now moving a condenser, now tuning to this wave-length, now to that.

"That's strange," Alec heard her mutter to herself, after a long time.

"What's strange?" he asked.

"Why, somebody has been calling and calling Cape May. And he doesn't get any answer. I can't understand it. I haven't any idea who is talking. I never heard his call before. He's WNA."

With a bound Alec was beside her. "That's Roy Mercer on the *Lycoming*," he cried. "May I have the receivers a moment, please."

Alec slipped on the headpiece and sat down at his key. "WNA — WNA — WNA de 3ADH — 3ADH — 3ADH," he flashed.

Almost at once came the response. "3ADH — 3ADH — 3ADH de WNA — WNA — WNA — K."

"Hello, Roy!" ticked off Alec. "This is Alec Cunningham. Just happened to hear you calling Cape May. Can't imagine why they didn't answer. How are you?"

"Fine. How are you? What are you doing?"

"All O. K. Counting oyster larvæ with a microscope just now. Tell you all about it some day. What are you sailing so early for?"

"New schedule. Going to touch at some West Indian ports and Yucatan on way to Galveston. Due back here a month from to-day. That's August twenty-two. Be sure to watch for me. May have something interesting to tell you. How are

you getting on? Heard from any of the other fellows of the Camp Brady Wireless Patrol?"

For some time the two old comrades talked as fast as they could flash their messages to each other. Then Alec laid down his receivers and turned to Elsa. "It certainly is good to hear from Roy," he said. "He's one of the fellows from the Camp Brady Wireless Patrol at home. He's a prince, too. No end of pluck and brains. Why, he saved the *Lycoming* from a collision in a fog, just with his wireless. And he was washed overboard when he was helping to take a line to the disabled steamer *Empress* during a hurricane in the Gulf of Mexico, and was swept into Corpus Christi by the tidal wave. He got the news of the disaster there to the outside world by wireless that he made himself and so got help for the city. Oh! He's a wonderful chap. How I wish you knew him. He's true as steel. They don't make any others quite so fine as Roy."

"If he's a friend of yours, Alec, I know he's all right. You wouldn't have any other kind of friends. But as for their not making any other boys as fine as Roy, humph! I guess I know somebody that's true as steel myself."

"I must hustle along with my job," said Alec, and he went back to his microscope.

Finally, his bottles examined and cleaned and all his apparatus stowed away, Alec picked up the setting-pole. "It's time we were heading for Bivalve," he said.

He backed the *Osprey* out from between the islets, turned her, and pushed his way back to the open water. Then, having a favoring wind, he hoisted his sail, and the *Osprey* went skimming over the waves on the homeward track.

CHAPTER XXI

THE GREAT SECRET

SO eager was Alec to return to his investigations that he slipped back to the oyster-beds that very night, so as to be on hand at the earliest possible moment next day. His mind was afire, his whole being was keyed up. He was like a hound on a hot scent. He felt that he had his quarry almost within his reach. He wanted to press on at top speed until he grasped the prize. Neither storm nor calm, neither tide nor sickness, could long have delayed him; for Alec possessed that unusual quality of mind which made him rise superior to obstacles, once his interest was thoroughly aroused. Things that to some boys would have appeared as effective obstacles became to Alec, when he was thus aroused, only difficulties to be overcome. One by one he had surmounted all the barriers that he had so far encountered. Each victory made him only the keener to win another. Of all his struggles, the effort to learn the truth about the oyster had interested him most deeply, because he knew that exact knowledge along that line was the very corner-stone of his success, or, more accurately, of the success he was striving to build.

So daylight found Alec astir and already on his way to Captain Hardy's oyster-bed. For the facts that Alec and Elsa had discovered concerning Hardy's bed and the existence of the depression in the bottom of the Bay, had given Alec an idea that he could hardly wait to test out. He meant to find the entire truth about the little channel. He doubted if any one else had discovered the little trough or furrow in the bottom of the Bay, and if they had, he doubted whether its significance had occurred to the discoverers.

Now he proceeded to the upper end of Hardy's bed, and, dropping his lead, found exactly where the edge of the furrow lay. He noted its position with relation to the corner stakes of the grounds. Then he proceeded slowly down-stream, sounding as he went, to try to locate the inner edge of the ditch. For several hundred feet he felt his way along. Then he took a heavy weight, tied to it a line of the proper length, and to that he fastened a stick a few feet long, to the upper end of which he tied a white cloth. He lowered the weight to the bottom, dropping it, as nearly as he was able, on the very edge of the furrow or ditch in the mud. Then he adjusted his line so that the stick floated perpendicularly, holding the white cloth aloft, a foot or two above the surface of the water. Then he dropped the *Osprey* down-stream some hundreds of feet, and once more locating the edge of the depression in the bottom, made and anchored a second floating marker. Examination showed him that

the three points he had located—the one near Hardy's stakes and the two he had marked with flags,—were practically in a straight line. Once more he headed the *Osprey* down-stream, proceeding as far as he could go and still see his markers. Then he sounded, and found that he was still over the very edge of the depression. Apparently this depression ran in an almost perfectly straight line. Alec put down another flag. He now had marked the depression for a good many hundred yards.

Now he went back to his starting-point and began to study the current and the appearance of the water. The depression extended in exactly the same direction that the tide followed, so that the water would sweep straight through it, back and forth, back and forth ceaselessly, scouring it clean. Alec recalled what Roy had written him about the jetties at Galveston, and how the tide, sweeping in and out between them, had deepened the channel. To be sure, there were no jetties here to confine the flow of the tide to the depression, yet Alec felt sure that the current would keep the depression clean and perhaps even deepen it. For all time, at least for all calculable time, so far as he could see, the depression would remain in the bottom and create a vast slick along its side. In this slick he believed the oyster fry would be most numerous.

Slowly Alec proceeded along the edge of the slick, passing one after another the markers he had set up, and lifting them as he came to them. The edge of the slick, of course, followed the line of the

depression in the bottom. Alec knew it ought to do so, and the white flags proved that it did. On and on went Alec, studying the current, watching every wave and swirl in the tide. At the same time, he kept before him the map of the oyster-beds, marking down on the map as accurately as possible the edge of the slick. How far to the side this slick extended Alec did not know. He could determine that later. What he did know—at least he felt sure he knew it—was that every oyster-bed lying in this slick was a prime oyster ground. He would know for sure when he had made larvæ tests of water from the different beds.

For two or three miles Alec proceeded. The slick was still plainly discernible, and whenever Alec took soundings he found that the depression continued. At last he came to the point for which he was heading—the last lot of ground that had been staked. Beyond that was a vast area that any man might claim. So eager to see what he should find, so fearful and yet so hopeful was Alec, that he almost held his breath as he bent forward and peered out over the unstaked water. Would the slick continue through the unleashed areas or would it not?

“It does! It does!” cried Alec aloud, as he sailed past the very last oyster stake. As far as he could see, the water before him was sharply divided into two areas—one that rippled roughly as the tide swept onward, the other as smooth as though it had been rubbed with grease.

Into this smooth stretch of water Alec turned the *Osprey*. Then, his hands atremble with eagerness, he brought forth his testing apparatus and began to strain water from the bottom through his filter net. Here, there, over yonder, Alec pumped up water, until he had samples from a large acreage. His settling bottles were numbered, and on his chart he marked the location from which each sample came. At the same time he took soundings and tested the water for density and temperature. All these things he likewise set down on his chart. So eager was he to begin his count, that he could scarcely wait to stow away his instruments when he had done straining water. But when he started to use his microscope, he found that the wind had freshened so much he could not work well. It was blowing directly against the current, throwing up sizable rollers, and the *Osprey* was too unsteady for the trying work in hand. There was nothing to do but get to smooth water, and that meant to leave the Bay, for now whitecaps were breaking everywhere.

At first Alec hardly knew where to go. He thought of running into the mouth of the river. But that idea did not please him because passing boatmen might annoy him or at least interrupt him. And anyway, Alec preferred to carry on his investigations without others knowing about them. He had learned pretty well the fact that not everybody was to be trusted. Alec also thought of going to the point of land where he and Elsa had eaten their dinner. That did not seem altogether suitable,

either. Finally he decided to head for the *Osprey's* Nest. If no one was in sight when he got there, he would go in. If any one were by to watch him, he would pull into some neighboring inlet. As fast as his engine would take him, Alec drove through the waves. When he reached the shore just off the *Osprey's* Nest, not a boat of any sort was in sight. He shut off his power, pushed his little craft up the secret channel, and soon lay at anchor in his snug retreat. The shade was grateful and the *Osprey* was as steady as a rock. He could work in comfort and in perfect security.

Hour after hour Alec stuck to his job. At times his eyes ached so from the strain that he had to leave his microscope and bathe them in the salt sea water that he dipped up with a bucket. At noon he paused long enough to cook himself a warm meal and flash a greeting to Elsa. Then he went on with his work. As long as he could hold himself to his task he continued to count. Bottle after bottle he emptied, picking out one by one with his little needle thousands upon thousands of oyster larvæ. Again and again, as the day wore on, he laid down his implements, meaning to quit. And as often he picked them up after an interval, to do just a little bit more. There were limits to his endurance. His eyes would function only so long. But his soul was indomitable. So he kept on and on and on, until dusk found him with his task completed. When he talked to Elsa that night he was able to tell her that he had found the great secret. At least he believed

he had. He had discovered an unstaked area that he believed to be as good a place for oysters as any ground in the Bay.

Long after he turned away from his wireless, Alec sat on the deck of the *Osprey*. By every rule of the game he should have been asleep in his bunk. Physically he was worn out by the strain of his intense concentration. But mentally he was afire. The task that had tired his body had stimulated his brain to unusual activity. His vision was almost prophetic. He pictured the future as he wished it to be. And though his mental image was not an exact representation of life as it proved to be, it was a marvelous approximation. Nor was that strange. For Alec was learning that the more sharply he defined his ambitions, and the more exactly he pictured his path, the more likely he was to see his dreams become realities. He needed a map for his life, just as truly as he needed a chart for his oyster-beds.

Now, as he sat, silent, in the *Osprey*, his mind aglow with rosy pictures, the difficulties that once had seemed so insurmountable shrank and shrank until they appeared but mole-hills. Though he did not put it in so many words, Alec was coming to realize that a big accomplishment is only a great dream backed by prodigious labor. Labor is the thing it is made of, but without the inspiration of the dream the labor is impossible. So he let himself dream on and on in the darkness, resting on some soft cushions, listening to the gentle sigh of

the wind as it stirred the leaves above his head, dimly conscious of the stirrings of birds, the faint splashings of muskrats in the marsh above him, the quavering call of a distant owl. Overhead the stars twinkled. Light patches of cloud floated in the sky. The waters of the Bay washed the shores gently but audibly. The world was in repose. And at last Alec slept with it.

CHAPTER XXII

THE NEW CAPTAIN OF THE *BERTHA B*

DAY after day Alec toiled at his self-appointed task. Under the broiling sun and when cold rains were falling, with the wind whistling through the *Osprey's* rigging and in periods of calm, he was daily to be seen on the oyster grounds in his little boat. For whole days at a time he did nothing but take soundings and record the results. Other days he spent studying the currents, watching the tides, searching the face of the water diligently. At other times he gathered water samples here, there, yonder, everywhere, and followed that task by the more trying labor at the microscope. With every sample of water he analyzed, and every survey he made of the currents, he became more and more certain that he had found the thing for which he was searching. He knew exactly where he would put his oyster-beds. He would lease as much land along the edge of the depression in the bottom and immediately adjoining the land already staked as he could handle. By taking a long and narrow strip, he would be certain to have his grounds in the very heart of the slick.

No sooner had Alec made up his mind than he laid the matter before Captain Rumford. "I want

to lease one hundred acres right here," he said, pointing to a spot he had marked on his chart of the oyster-beds.

The shipper frowned. "What do you want of oyster-beds now?" he demanded. "You have no way to work them, and the tax on them will eat up your savings. You'll have to pay \$75 a year rental, besides the cost of surveying and staking your bed. The sum you'll pay out, just to hold that ground while you're earning your equipment, would go a long way toward paying for your boat. Besides, I don't like grounds so far out. The water's too deep. Oysters ought to be planted in shallow water."

"But you have some beds in deep water yourself, Captain," urged Alec.

"None of them is much good."

"Perhaps they aren't out far enough."

"Nonsense. Shallow water's the only good place for an oyster-bed. There's lots of beds out in deep water, but that's because all the grounds near shore had already been staked out and their owners had to take deep-water grounds or none at all. But it's no place for oysters."

"There's Hardy's bed," urged Alec. "That's as far out as any of them and it's a good bed. With proper care it would be one of the best. I've been examining the water there, and it's full of spat."

"Nonsense, all nonsense," said the shipper impatiently. "Elsa has been pumping me full of rubbish about what you are doing. As though you

could tell anything about an oyster ground by looking at a few drops of water through a microscope. This foolishness is the only thing I ever saw in you that I don't like. If only you'd drop it and go to work on my boats as I want you to, you'd get on fast. As for your leasing one hundred acres of oyster-land, and away out there at that, why, it's not to be thought of. It's ridiculous."

Alec looked very sober. From the quarter where he had expected help, came sudden opposition. It almost made him hesitate. "Captain Rumford," he said, "I'm mighty sorry we don't see things alike. I know it seems foolish for a lad of my years to be telling an old oyster captain like yourself anything about oystering. But I have to live up to my lights just as much as you have to live up to yours. I believe I'm right. When I'm done with this work I'll know whether I'm right or wrong. If I'm right, then I've found one of the best locations in the entire oyster region to start a new bed. I know it will cost me a lot to carry that bed. But I'm so sure I'm right that I'm willing to risk the money. I'm willing to bet on myself, if you want to put it that way. That matter is settled. The question is, Will you help me get the land I want, or must I ask somebody else to help me?"

"Well, I admire your pluck, anyway, youngster. If your judgment was half as good, you'd be a winner sure. Since you're so dead set on having those grounds, I'll have to help you get them, of course. You're not of age, are you?"

"No, sir. I was nineteen soon after I came to Bivalve. It won't be so long now until I am twenty."

"You have no guardian?"

"No. But I've been told I need one." Alec grinned. "Elsa says so."

"Well, she's right for once. I'll have to lease these lands in my own name and then transfer them to you later."

"That will be all right."

"Eh? You trust the old man, do you? Haven't you learned that you can't trust everybody? You've had experiences enough here to teach you that lesson pretty well. Suppose your bed *should* turn out to be worth something, and I decided not to hand it over to you? Had you thought of that possibility, lad?"

"Captain Rumford," said Alec, "there isn't anything I've learned better than the lesson that there are some people I can't trust. And while I've been learning that, I've found that there are some I can."

"Thank you, lad," said the shipper, evidently deeply touched. "Thank you. You can put your mind at rest about your oyster grounds. I'll get them and I'll give you a paper showing that I only hold them in trust for you. And I'll do more. If you don't have the money to pay the expenses, I'll lend it to you and you can pay me whenever you can. But that's because I have confidence in you and not in your oyster grounds."

“Thank you, Captain,” said Alec. “It won’t be necessary. I have the money.”

The captain turned away and went to his desk to make out his application for the desired grounds. But all the way to his chair he kept muttering, “The little fool. He’s just throwing his money away.”

Having decided the question of his own grounds, Alec turned his attention to the shipper’s beds. He spent several days sounding them and studying the water above them. Mostly the captain’s beds were well in shore. These he had inherited from his father, who had begun oystering before the shipper was born. These beds were usually very productive. In deep water the captain also owned considerable holdings that he had acquired with profits derived from the beds he had inherited. But none of these had ever proved to be very productive. There was never any very great set of spat in them, and unless they were planted with seed-oysters it hardly paid to dredge them. But, of course, the captain always put seed in all his beds and so he had steadily made some money from them. When Alec analyzed the larval content of the shipper’s various beds under the microscope, he found that the shallow water was very rich in spat. The contour of the shore made a vast eddy where these beds lay. The beds farther out were located in the strong current, with not the slightest suspicion of a slick or an eddy near them.

When Alec had concluded his examination of the

shipper's beds, he went directly to their owner, though he made a wry face as he thought of what was probably before him.

"Captain Rumford," he said, "I've been working out in your beds for several days. Your shallow water beds are very fine grounds, but ——"

"Of course they are. Of course they are. Shallow water's the only proper place for an oyster-bed."

"Your other beds, I was going to say," went on Alec, "are not nearly so good."

"Of course not. Of course not. What are you telling me all this for? Think I don't know it?"

"I don't believe you'll ever get a big set of spat in those outside beds," went on Alec. "I don't believe you'd get enough of a set to pay for shelling the grounds."

"Well, well," said the shipper rather testily, "is this supposed to be news to me?"

"I was going to say," went on Alec, choking down a feeling of resentment, "that if you would sell those beds and buy Hardy's bed, you'd make a profitable deal. I'd be willing to wager that you'd get as many oysters from spat in Hardy's bed as you would from the seed you planted. You'd get a tremendous catch every year."

"Fiddlesticks! I never heard of such a thing in a deep-water bed."

"But, Captain Rumford," protested Alec, "don't the other oystermen who own beds near Hardy's get good hauls?"

"I can't deny some of them do," admitted the shipper, "but I can't understand it. That's no place for an oyster-bed, way out in that deep water. They can't expect to have luck always, though."

Alec gave up. It was no use to try to overcome the shipper's prejudices.

Day after day he continued his labors. He was so constantly on the water that those who saw him became curious to know what he could be doing. Now this oysterman, and now that, as Alec ran across him, tried to learn what Alec was doing out on the Bay so much. Occasionally boats sailed near him simply to watch him. At such times Alec pretended to be fishing. Rather he did fish. So he caught many a toothsome meal. He also made a large net of mosquito-netting, which he used for catching crabs. Of course, all this curiosity was aroused, not about Alec himself, for nobody cared much about a homeless lad, but because Alec was supposed to be doing something for Captain Rumford. If the leading oyster shipper at Bivalve found it worth while to keep a man out among the oyster-beds week in and week out, the curious figured it might be worth their own while to do a little examining themselves. The difficulty was that nobody knew exactly what Alec was doing. So it came about that Alec did exactly what he did not want to do. He called attention to his own efforts. But his work was well along toward completion before it was generally known that he was doing anything out of the ordinary. What annoyed Alec

most of all about the matter was his fear lest some one track him to the *Osprey's* Nest and so discover the secret hiding-place. Frequently, when other boats were near at hand toward dusk, Alec came up to the oyster wharf and tied up in the slip at Captain Rumford's pier. He knew that even the most reckless would hesitate to touch him there, under the glare of the pier-shed light and with the watchman within call. So, whether any of Hardy's friends ever wished to harm him or not, Alec came through the summer unscathed, and his hiding-place remained undiscovered.

One day, when August was more than half gone, Elsa called him on the wireless and announced that repairs on Captain Flint's boat, the *Rebecca*, were completed and the paint dry, and that the Rumfords were going to take their annual family cruise aboard of her. Alec was invited to go along and no answer but a favorable one would be accepted. Of course, there was nothing for Alec to do but put his work aside and say he would go. In his heart he was more than glad to put his work aside. Week after week he had stuck to it, holding himself with iron determination to his task. But now the zest was gone out of it. The long grind was wearing on his nerves. Joyously he looked forward to this holiday.

The next morning he did not put out in his boat, but went to the shipper's office to thank him for the invitation and to see if he could be of assistance in preparing for the cruise. But the instant Alec

saw the shipper, he knew that something had gone wrong.

"Bagley's left us," blurted out the shipper, the moment he saw Alec. And there were tears in his voice, if not in his eyes.

"What do you mean, sir?" asked Alec.

"He's going to the Chesapeake next fall. Got a chance to go into partnership with a shipper there. Don't blame him a bit, but Gad! I hate to lose him. He's been with me seventeen years. Never worked anywhere but on the *Bertha B*. Started oystering on her as a deck-hand. Don't know what I'll do for another captain."

"You can get plenty of them," said Alec.

"Certainly," said the shipper, "but not plenty of Bagleys. Why, I could trust that man with my life."

"Take Hawley," said Alec.

"What!" cried the shipper. "Make a captain out of a fellow that was fired from the *Bertha B* less than a year ago for being drunk? You're crazy."

"You're foolish if you don't take him," urged Alec. "Why, Captain Rumford, that man's the very soul of honesty. I know him like a book. I'd trust him just as far as I would you, Captain, and that's saying all I know how to say. It's old John Barleycorn you have in mind. But Jim cut his acquaintance long ago. And you know as well as I do that there isn't a better sailor in the fleet."

The shipper was silent a long time. "Hanged

if I don't try it," he said at last. "I always liked Jim when he was sober. I'll take him along on this party and see how he can handle a boat. Now don't you give him any hint of what's coming."

"I'm mighty glad you're going to take him," cried Alec. "I haven't a better friend in the world than Jim. By the way, when are we going to start on our little party?"

"Just as soon as we can get ready. It will likely take most of the day to get the boat provisioned and get the stuff aboard that they want to bring from home. We ought to be off in the morning."

"Then I'll call up Elsa and see what I can do to help." And Alec bustled away, joyful in the thought of the little outing ahead of him. Could he have known exactly what was to happen to the little pleasure party, his face would have worn a very different aspect indeed.

CHAPTER XXIII

ADrift IN THE STORM

ALEC could not see into the future, this time at least, and he went about the work of preparing the *Rebecca* with a merry heart. The ship looked very fine, indeed, as she lay at the captain's wharf, all spick and span, and proudly displaying her new coat of paint. She was considerably larger than the *Bertha B.* Her masts were stepped at a rakish angle. Her rigging was neat. Her lines were good. For a boat of her size she carried an unusual amount of sail. Her hold had been emptied of all movable tackle and her decks cleared before she had been hauled out for repairs. Nothing had yet been replaced. And in order that the party might have all the room possible, nothing was to be replaced until after the cruise. Even the anchor and the chains had been removed. Inside, the cabin was perfectly bare. But the woodwork had all been freshly painted or varnished, and the *Rebecca* needed only a few furnishings to make her very attractive, indeed.

While the shipper and Alec were making a hasty examination of the boat, a truck load of furnishings arrived from the shipper's home, and the two at once started to carry the things aboard. There

were cushions, and bedding, and chairs, and rugs, and blankets, and wraps, and a host of other things to make the boat comfortable. And there were great ticks to be filled with straw for the men to sleep on in the hold, while Elsa and her mother occupied the cabin.

When all the things were aboard and the truck had gone away, Captain Rumford turned his attention to the ship's gear. He was too careful a sailor not to make sure that everything was right before he set sail. He found everything in good condition. Only the anchor and the anchor chain were missing. The chains had been laid away when the *Rebecca* was hauled out. It was neither easy nor convenient to get them now. The captain studied the matter for a moment. "About all we'll need an anchor for," he muttered to himself, "is to keep us from drifting at night. I'll just take along that little light anchor in the storeroom. We can bend an old cable on it and it will answer our purpose. If a storm should come up, we'll run into a harbor. Now I'll go see about that little anchor."

The captain grabbed an oyster truck and hurried to his storeroom to get it. A moment later he returned, trundling the anchor and an old hawser before him. Alec helped lift them aboard. Then, while the captain was bending on the hawser, Alec busied himself in the cabin, putting the things there in some sort of order.

Presently came a load of provisions. Alec carried to the storeroom bag after bag. It seemed

to him he had brought enough stuff aboard to feed a ship's crew for a year. The provisions he stowed away in the cupboards in the cabin. When Alec was done, the captain joined him and inspected the cupboards.

"Looks to me as though we're ready to cast off the minute we get our crew aboard," he said. "She seems fit to contend with almost anything—especially hunger."

"I can't think of another thing we could wish for," said Alec.

"Unless it was some music," said the captain wistfully. "It never seemed right to me to go on a party like this without some music. I'd have given a lot if Elsa had learned to play the piano, but she just wouldn't. Hasn't a particle of love for music. Funny, isn't it, when I like it so much. She likes to dance, too. You'd think she'd have some liking for music, wouldn't you?"

Alec made no response. But when the shipper drove away in his car, Alec ran to the *Osprey* and quickly uncoupled his wireless outfit. "It won't be much," he said, "but it's all I can do for the captain. He can have music at night now, anyway. I'll try to surprise him."

He fastened his instruments in the cabin of the *Rebecca*, very much as he had had them in the *Bertha B*. With two sticks he made an aerial which he placed flat on the roof of the cabin. The sticks were fastened together like a Maltese cross, and around their ends Alec wrapped strand after strand

of wire, bringing the end into the cabin through the tiny window just above his instruments. He made a ground by twisting his wire to a little length of chain, which he fastened over the side so that its end hung in the water. Then he tested his instruments and found they were in order. As far as Alec could see, everything was now in readiness for the cruise.

Doubly delightful to Alec was the little trip that began next morning because of the weeks of hard labor that had preceded it. Just as his work had palled on him because he had been unable to combine any amusement with it, so amusements pall when they are not interspersed with toil. Now Alec's appetite for pleasure was more than whetted. He was ravenous for enjoyment. And being so, he enjoyed everything. The sun that shone so bright seemed merry rather than hot to Alec. The winds that circled about the mastheads seemed to Alec as playful as squirrels frisking in a tree top. The waves seemed to laugh in glee as the wind drove them before it, showing their white teeth in gleaming smiles as they flashed in the sun. White teeth they were, too, that could rend as well as gleam in the sun. Well enough Alec knew that fact. Before many days he was to know it better still. But now he had no thought of care. He had put work aside. He was like a small boy on a lark. Usually rather staid and sober, now he kept the party laughing at his antics. And they were ready enough to laugh with him. For this was a real pleasure party.

For the time being, care had been thrown to the winds.

But if the mere joy of being alive and free and with friends could make Alec happy, the fact that he was seeing new things and learning new things gave him added enjoyment. For never, for a single instant, did Alec forget to pick up bits of knowledge that came his way. For well nigh a year, now, he had lived on the waves. He had sailed the Delaware in sunshine and in storm, when the weather was blazing hot and when ice formed on the deck. And yet his knowledge of this great body of water was limited wholly to what he had seen in the narrow compass of the oyster-beds, or to what he had read. Now he was to see with his own eyes the wonders of the deep. For as yet Alec had hardly been out of sight of land, and he had never seen the ocean.

Alec would not have been himself had he not remembered to bring along a map. And it was the largest map of the Bay he could lay his hands on. He saw at a glance that in contour the Bay was roughly pear-shaped. On either shore little excrescences, like the warts and blemishes that come on real pears, stuck out here and there, to mar the perfect pear-shaped outline of the Bay. The largest of these was Egg Island Point, off which lay the light he knew so well. Miles farther up the coast the *Rebecca* passed Ben Davis Point. And still farther along stretched a wide cove, with the Cohansey River pouring into it, and a little, squat

lighthouse standing on a point, to guide the mariner into the stream.

Other points of interest the party visited, too—little summer resorts, like Fortescue, and lighthouses, where they were welcomed in a way that left no doubt of their hosts' sincerity; for callers are few at a lighthouse, and usually they are welcomed accordingly.

In the evenings, the party ran slowly before the gentle night wind, or, anchoring far offshore to avoid mosquitoes, gave themselves up to friendly talk and laughter—all save the captain. For him there was but one nocturnal diversion; that was listening to the music with Alec's wireless.

Sometimes the men went ashore and searched in the salt holes in the marsh for crabs. Or all hands fished for them from the deck of the *Rebecca*, lowering great chunks of white meat on strings, well weighted, and gently raising their catch to the surface when they felt a nibbling at the bait. Then came the fun of scooping the crabs with long-handled dip-nets. Astonishingly often they failed to net them, too, for the wary creatures, despite their seeming awkwardness, vanished the instant they came to the surface. Great, gray-green things they were, with savage-looking pincers that could crush a finger severely if they got hold of one. And although he had previously caught crabs, Alec could hardly accustom himself to their color, so long had he known only the cooked crab of inland restaurants, which had turned red in boiling.

Sometimes they fished for weakfish, using pieces of crab meat for bait. Beautiful, big fish they caught, too. And sometimes they got sea-bass and flounders. And as often as not, they pulled in the troublesome toadfish, which Alec came to detest as much as the sailors on the oyster-boats did.

Day followed day in unbroken pleasure. Now they were here, now there. When Alec told the shipper that he had never seen the ocean, the shipper said he would head for the sea at once. Alec could have a good look at it, and then the party must head for home. Playtime was about ended.

But it was one thing to say they would go to the sea and another thing to get there. The flood-tide held them back. The wind was hardly more than stirring. So fierce was the sun, so intense the heat on deck, that both Elsa and her mother retreated to the cabin. The captain sought what coolness he could find in the uncertain shade of a sail. Big Jim Hawley stood at the wheel, silent, imperturbable. Alec flung himself on the deck near him. From time to time Hawley studied the sky. Great cumulus clouds were forming near the horizon.

"We'll have a storm to-night," he said to Alec.

"The sooner the better," said Alec. "Anything to break this heat wave."

They rolled slowly on. The water gently heaved and the *Rebecca* swayed with it. There was barely wind enough to keep the sails from flapping.

"We'll never reach the Capes in daylight at this

rate," said Hawley. "The days are getting much shorter."

"That's so," said Alec. "Yesterday was the twenty-first of August. It's just two months since the longest day and the days are shortening fast."

Slowly the *Rebecca* forged ahead. Even the cool breath of the water could scarcely make the sun's heat endurable. Under the fierce rays the smell of paint became almost overpowering. The tar on ropes and rigging almost melted and ran. The fleecy clouds along the horizon bulked larger and larger. Slowly they rose toward the zenith. Late afternoon came. The ship was still far from the Capes. Captain Rumford studied the clouds carefully.

"We'll pull in behind the breakwater when we get there, Jim," he said quietly. "I think that storm will be a rip snorter. We might as well be on the safe side."

They went on. Gradually the sun's rays grew feebler. Gusts of vapor were hurtling across the sky, curtaining the fiery beams. The sky turned a peculiar greenish-copper color. The thunder-heads mounted ever higher. Then the sun was shut from sight. It grew dusk. Darkness came, as sudden as the dropping of a curtain. Afar off, flashes of lightning rent the clouds. Thunder rumbled ominously in the distance. The wind died away. It grew calm as midnight. The *Rebecca* rolled idly, her sheets flapping. The men got into their oilskins.

"Better shorten sail," said the shipper.

They ran to the halyards. Down came the great canvases. Nimbly they fastened the reef-points and made all as snug as possible.

"Now let her blow," said the shipper. "The more wind, the faster we go. We'll reach the breakwater and heave to. I kind of wish we had a heavier anchor, though."

None too soon had the *Rebecca* shortened sail. Afar off an ominous rushing sound was heard. The wind began to come in short puffs. Flash after flash of lightning illumined the angry clouds. The roaring sound grew louder. It came on with the speed of an express-train. Over the waves swept a sheet of falling rain like a very wall of water. Alec closed the companionway and jammed on the hatch covers. In another moment the storm was upon them.

Over the waves the falling rain came hissing like steam. It fell in a torrent. In a second the deck of the *Rebecca* was running with water. The sails tightened and bellied as the wind came smack! against them. The *Rebecca* trembled all over, then bent to the blast and began to run through the water like a wild thing. Big Hawley stood at his wheel, as steady as a new mast. He handled the ship as though she were a toy.

"Some thunder-storm," he smiled at Alec. "It'll blow itself out in a little while. Nothing to worry about. It'll get us to the breakwater in jig time."

It did, too. Long before Alec had any idea where they were, Jim brought the *Rebecca* up into the wind, and with her sails close-hauled, drove her shoreward. The rain still fell heavily, but Alec could dimly make out the curving shore-line and across it, like the string to a bow, stretched a black streak that Alec knew must be the breakwater. The waves were dashing on it madly. But the wind now blew almost parallel with the long stone pile. The breakwater gave them no protection. Rather it was a menace. If the ship should drag her anchor and drift on it, her hull would be battered to pieces in no time. Surely this was no place to heave to in such a storm.

"We'll just beat up along the coast, Jim," said the shipper. "It's a windward shore. The storm will blow itself out pretty soon."

The big sailor threw his weight against the wheel. The ship heeled over in the wind. Something cracked like a rifle-shot. The wheel flew around, almost dropping Hawley to the deck. The rudder had broken.

"Overboard with the anchor!" called the shipper.

Hawley and Alec ran forward to execute the order. There was a splash and the anchor rope paid out fast. Hawley gave the ship sufficient line and went aft again to examine the steering-gear.

"Can't do anything with it," said the shipper. "The rudder itself is broken. We'll have to ride the storm out here, then get help."

He went forward and examined the anchor line. Then he looked long and steadily at the breakwater, which was all too close to please him.

"She's holding all right," he said. "We might as well eat while we wait for the storm to end."

They entered the cabin and stripped off their oilskins. "Any danger?" asked Mrs. Rumford, with anxious eyes.

"We're perfectly safe as long as our anchor doesn't drag. It's a little light, that's all. But it's holding well. I don't think there is any probability of harm."

Elsa and her mother got supper. From time to time the captain peered out of the cabin window. All seemed well. They sat down to eat. It was not a merry meal, as some of their meals had been, but the storm had not dulled their appetites and they ate with enjoyment. Elsa and Alec even joked a little. Hawley was silent from habit. Mrs. Rumford was a little apprehensive. The captain was too busy with his own thoughts to talk.

Suddenly the big sailor jumped to his feet. "Feels as though we are movin', Cap'n," he said. He pulled on his oilskins and stepped out in the rain. In a moment he came tearing back. "We're adrift," he bellowed down the companionway. "The anchor line has parted."

Neither the shipper nor Alec waited to don oilskins, but rushed out on deck at once. There could be no doubt about the situation. The *Rebecca* had swung around broadside to the wind and was wal-

lowing in the waves. The anchor line dangled loosely at her bow. The situation was critical. The breakwater was not far away, though fortunately the wind did not now blow toward it. Plainly they were drifting abreast of it, gathering speed with every minute. And both wind and tide were driving them toward the open sea.

"If only we had put those dredges aboard," said the shipper, "we might hold ourselves yet. There isn't a thing on board we can put down to hold with. If only we don't go on that stone pile, we'll be all right. This storm can't last long, and somebody will pick us up, sure."

Driven by the wind, the tide was running like a mill-race, and the *Rebecca* was swept along at an unbelievable pace.

The shipper and Alec stepped into the cabin and pulled on their oilskins, then returned to the deck.

"We don't have even a boat-hook or a setting-pole," sighed the shipper. "I suppose they wouldn't be much use anyway, but a fellow could at least try to fend the ship off those rocks."

Fearful, he looked toward the breakwater. Little by little the *Rebecca* was drawing closer to it. At the same time she was rapidly driving past the great stone pile. Would she clear it or not? There was nothing to do but stand and wait. And the three sailors almost held their breath as they steadied themselves by the rigging and watched. Nearer the boat came to the rocks and nearer, and the end of the breakwater was still rods away.

"She's going to strike," said the shipper. "She'll crash in another minute. We'll have to lower the life-boat."

They ran aft toward the davits, then paused a single second to watch. A great wave was lifting the *Rebecca*. Up she rose high on the crest, and swept straight toward the breakwater.

"Get the women on deck quick," roared the shipper. "She's going to crash."

Alec sprang for the companionway. The ship gave a lurch, but there was no noise, no jar. An enormous wave, rushing against the breakwater, had rebounded and swept the ship clear. The tide hurled her forward. A moment later, by the narrowest of margins, the vessel skimmed across the end of the breakwater, and shot into the open water beyond. For the moment she was safe.

Straight toward the open sea she went, fast as wind and tide could drive her. The storm still continued. The rain had slackened, though it still fell. The wind yet blew with violence. With every moment and with every foot they drew offshore the waves ran higher. Now driving straight ahead, now swinging in the wind, now wallowing in the waves, and at times smashing stern first into the rolling sea, the *Rebecca* drove on before the storm.

"Make a flare," said the shipper grimly. "We've got to get help."

The big sailor set about executing his order, but Alec darted into the cabin. Swiftly he threw over his switch. Then, steadying his hand, he flashed

the call, "SOS—SOS—SOS." Then he paused and listened.

Almost immediately came a reply. "I have your signal of distress. Who and where are you?"

"Schooner *Rebecca*," flashed back Alec. "Drifting out to sea between the Delaware Capes, just off Henlopen. Rudder broken, anchor lost. Who and where are you?"

"Steamer *Lycoming*. About thirty miles south of the Delaware Capes. Should reach you in less than two hours. Keep a flare burning."

Alec leaped from his instrument as though he were shot. "It's Roy," he cried. "It's Roy. The *Lycoming* is only thirty miles away. She'll reach us in less than two hours."

Again he turned to his instrument. Now he flashed out the *Lycoming's* call. "WNA—WNA—WNA de 3ADH—3ADH—3ADH," he flashed.

At once came the response. "3ADH—3ADH—3ADH de WNA—WNA—WNA. Have been trying to get you, Alec. Where are you?"

"On the *Rebecca*," flashed back Alec. "Just sent the SOS you answered."

"Thank God you've got a wireless!" came back the answer from Roy. "Don't worry. We'll find you sure. We've already shifted our course. We're heading straight for the Capes."

"Stand by while I tell the Captain, Roy," signalled Alec. Then he threw over his switch and darted out on deck.

"We're saved, Captain," he shouted through the storm. "The *Lycoming* is only thirty miles away and is heading straight for us. She will reach us in less than two hours."

Anxiously the three watchers peered into the dark. Aloft swung their lights. In a dish-pan on the deck a flare was burning. From time to time Hawley fed oil-soaked pieces of wood to the flames. The rain had ceased to fall. The wind still blew fitfully, but with lessened violence. The night was as dark as a tunnel. Up and down, up and down, the oyster-boat now rose and fell on the great swells of the Atlantic. At last Alec was within sight of the ocean. But it was little he saw of it or cared to see of it.

What he was watching for was a light. Minute after minute the silent watchers strained their eyes into the darkness. Time passed. A half hour went by. An hour elapsed. Then far off in the dark something glowed faintly. Minute by minute the light grew brighter. It came closer.

Alec darted into the cabin. He flashed the *Lycoming's* call and got an answer. "We can see the lights of a big steamer," he signalled. "Can you see us yet? We are burning a flare on deck and our lights are burning aloft."

"We see you plainly. Will reach you in a few minutes."

Alec shut off his power. "Come on deck," he said to Elsa.

She followed him up the companionway. Alec

tore off his coat and wrapped it around her. Then he took her hand and led her forward.

"Look," he said. "You may never see another sight like this."

"I never want to," said Elsa.

"That is the *Lycoming*," said Alec. "Didn't I tell you that Roy was a prince? We shall owe our lives to him. He's a wonderful wireless man."

"Will you ever learn any sense?" said Elsa. "How would Roy or his captain have known that we were here if we hadn't had a good wireless man on board the *Rebecca*?"

Now the *Lycoming* was close at hand. Suddenly her search-light blazed forth and rested fairly on the little schooner. Slowly the big steamer drew near. Then she stopped. Presently a boat shot into the circle of light. Lusty sailors were pulling at the oars. A line trailed behind. The boat passed slowly to leeward of the helpless oyster-boat, then drew close. A sailor rose to his feet and cast a little line. Swiftly it came hissing through the air. Hawley grasped it before it touched the deck. Hand over hand he pulled the line aboard. The light line was followed by a huge hawser. Eagerly the line was hauled aboard. Big Hawley made it fast. The ship's boat disappeared into the darkness. The sound of tackle-blocks soon followed. Slowly the *Lycoming* moved ahead. The hawser tightened. The *Rebecca* swung gently round, then slowly moved ahead. In another moment she was moving steadily through the water.

CHAPTER XXIV

MISFORTUNES NEVER COME SINGLY

“WELL, I never thought I'd come to this in an oyster-boat,” said the shipper. “We might have been in real trouble if that steamer hadn't happened along.”

Alec thought they were in real trouble as it was. “I wonder where the *Lycoming* will take us,” he said.

“By George! We must attend to that at once. We don't want to be towed clear off to New York. Call up the captain, Alec, and see if he won't tow us into the Cape May harbor.”

Alec hurried to the cabin and called Roy. Then he explained the situation. After a time he got an answer. The *Lycoming* would tow the *Rebecca* to the Cape May harbor, but a tug would be needed to take the schooner into the harbor itself. Roy said he would try to arrange for the tug. Alec listened in while Roy was talking with Cape May. Finally Roy called Alec again and said that a tug would meet them. In little more than an hour's time the *Lycoming* was nearing Cape May. The tug came alongside and made fast to the *Rebecca*. Then the tow-line was cast off, good-byes were called, Captain Rumford sent his thanks and good wishes to Captain Lansford of the *Lycoming*, and finally Alec wired a grateful message to Roy from

the party on the *Rebecca*. The big steamer moved off into the darkness, the tug began to puff busily, and before another hour passed, the *Rebecca* lay safe and still within the harbor. Next day temporary repairs were made to the *Rebecca's* rudder, and before night the oyster-boat lay snug at her own pier at Bivalve.

The pleasure trip had been a great success—all but the very end of it; and very little harm had come of that. Excepting for the rudder, which was quickly replaced, not a thing was damaged on the little boat. The greatest injury came to the captain's pocketbook. Tug hire and the cost of repairs made the outing expensive. But so long as they had come home in safety, the shipper did not complain.

By the time the *Rebecca* was in commission again the oyster season was at hand. Orders began to appear for oysters. As was usual at the beginning of the season, there were too few oyster orders to pay the expenses of operating. Some shippers did not start their boats promptly; but Captain Rumford had built up his big business as much by providing service as by selling good oysters. It was his idea that as an oyster merchant it was up to him to provide oysters whenever they were in season. So the *Bertha B* started promptly.

Now it seemed as though misfortune had marked the shipper for her very own; as though, balked of her prey on that stormy day in August, she meant to pursue the shipper until she got him. An un-

broken succession of little accidents occurred on the *Bertha B.* Now a dredge was lost and valuable time consumed in grappling for it. Now a propeller blade was snapped off by something in the water—perhaps the submerged remains of an oyster stake. Then a piston-rod in the engine broke. One mishap followed another. And it required both time and money to repair each. The shipper's repair bill alone made him look serious.

But bad luck did not end there. From the very start it was evident that it was to be a poor year for oysters. The shipper's boat worked long hours and caught relatively few oysters. As more orders came in, other boats were put in commission. The result was the same. Day after day the boats came in with only half loads. Nor was this situation peculiar to Captain Rumford. Few, indeed, were the shippers who had many oysters that year. In his shallow water beds, or such of them as contained oysters old enough to dredge, the captain got a fair catch. But all the profit he made from these beds, and more too, was eaten up by the expense of working his deep water beds. So far as he could, the shipper took his oysters from his inner beds. But these had been dredged so close in the humming oyster seasons just past, and did not begin to contain as many oysters as the shipper needed.

What was worse, when he had taken the present season's crop from these inner beds, there would be no more to dredge for three years. For these were the beds he had seeded in the spring—these and the

new bed far out that Captain Flint had seeded so heavily and that Hardy had tried to raid. Week after week the oyster-boats continued their work, and with every week the captain found himself a poorer man. But there was nothing to do but go on—to borrow money, if necessary, and then borrow more and more. If he expected to retain his customers for future years when oysters were plentiful and profitable again, he must carry his load of loss now. And of course the captain went on.

He was not a superstitious man, was Captain Rumford, but like all sailors he came near to being one. It seemed to him that the loss of Captain Bagley was directly connected with his misfortunes; as though that loss were the first link in a chain of misfortune. Close on Bagley's loss had come the accident to the *Rebecca*. Then had followed a big string of accidents to Bagley's old ship. Of course, big Jim Hawley, the new commander, was in no way responsible for these, and yet it almost seemed as though there was a direct connection between his coming aboard and these accidents. What Captain Rumford forgot was the fact that the *Bertha B*, like the one-hoss shay, had reached a point where she was almost ready to go to pieces. She was the oldest boat in the captain's fleet. She had seen continuous service for dozens of years. Her engine was the very oldest in use among the oyster-boats. Nothing can wear forever, and the *Bertha B* was reaching the point where she would have to be laid on the shelf. It was big Jim Haw-

ley's misfortune that he assumed command of her at that particular moment.

Had Captain Rumford only thought of it, he could have balanced a whole string of fortunate events against this string of unfortunate ones; and these had begun with the coming of Alec. The largest bead in this string was the fact of their rescue on the *Rebecca*. There were other beads that at present Captain Rumford failed to note at all, or even to understand that they were pieces of good fortune, as, for example, Alec's survey of the oyster waters. In good time, however, he was to see that matter in its true light.

As for Alec, he had never toiled so hard in his life. A year of unremitting labor had taught him how to work. Not only was he able to hold himself rigidly to his tasks, but he could accomplish more in a given time than he had ever done before. Nor was that strange. He was merely acquiring the skill that comes of practice. For now Alec felt like an old hand in the oyster business. He had passed a full year as an oysterman. He had seen every phase of the oyster business. He had learned as many actual facts about oystering as almost anybody at Bivalve knew; and he had acquired many that most of his fellow oystermen would never understand. What he still lacked was the wisdom that comes from long experience. Only time could give him that. Yet he was a generation ahead of his fellow oystermen. He was the first of the oyster pioneers of the new school.

Hard, indeed, must have been the luck that followed the *Bertha B*, when with two men like Alec and Captain Hawley aboard her she was still a failure. For Captain Hawley was a new Hawley, indeed. He still had all his old strength and courage, all his innate good-nature, all his deep knowledge of oystering as it had been practiced. And he had more. He had been recreated. His ambition had been again aroused. He had been fired afresh with the determination to climb up in the oyster business. His unexpected elevation to the captaincy of a ship had stimulated and aroused him to the utmost. His association with Alec had brought out the best that was in him. And these two comrades, Alec and Captain Jim, worked to make things go for the shipper, as few men ever worked for another. They drove the ship, they drove the crew—by example rather than compulsion—they made everything work as close to one hundred per cent. efficiency as is humanly possible—and yet they failed. No matter what the obstacles, they could have dredged the oysters, had there been oysters to dredge; but they could not make oysters.

Again and again Alec went over with Jim the life-history of the oyster, for now Captain Hawley was as eager to learn the real truth about oysters as once he had been indifferent to that truth. In his study of the oyster-beds in future years, Alec knew he would no longer have to work alone. Now they tried to account for the poor yield of oysters. For everywhere the yield was poor. Nobody had a good

crop. And more than one shipper saw bankruptcy looming in the offing. Every aspect of oystering Alec and Captain Jim considered as they sat by the cabin fire in the *Bertha B* at night. The tide, the bottom, the storms, the quantities of seed used. And here Captain Jim's memory was of wonderful help. Apparently he knew all about the weather for years past. Eventually they hit upon the truth. The year in which the present season's catch was planted had been the coldest in a decade. Storm had followed storm. And finally, seed had been scarce.

"I think we have solved it," said Alec at last. "It was too cold for spawning, so there were few larvæ in the water. The storms must have shifted the sand and mud in the bottom and smothered many oysters. On top of all that there were few seed to plant. No wonder there are no oysters this year."

"Alec," said the big sailor, "if what you say is true, and I now believe it is, there won't be many oysters next season, either, or the year after. For we had three cold, stormy springs running."

Alec considered the matter a while. "It will go tough with the shipper," he said, "for this year will clean up his inshore beds pretty well. He can't get anything out of them for three seasons. And I don't believe there'll be many oysters in his other beds. We must think what we can do to help Captain Rumford."

In every way that he could, Alec was assisting

the captain. Every day when the *Bertha B* came in from the oyster grounds, Alec dropped off at the pier and hustled to the office to help the shipper with the office work. And now he was permitted to do some of the bookkeeping. For, with things going so badly on his boats, the shipper had often to be away from his office. There were banks to be visited, merchants to be consulted, ship-chandlers to be seen. His line of credit was worrying the shipper quite as much as his line of boats. For he understood by this time that he would have to operate at a loss for the entire season.

Sometimes there came a dull day when Alec could attend to his shell business. Now that he had lost Hawley as a partner, he had had to employ some one else to gather his shells. He had found a young lad, who was strong and willing to work, and who had given excellent service. Work, rather than workers, was at a premium this season, for already many boats had stopped running, and Alec had to pay no more for his new assistant than he had formerly paid to Hawley. And as he continued to live on the *Bertha B*, Alec was still able to save several dollars each week. This year he would have all the shells from all the shippers, and he was certain of a good profit. From this he meant to give his helper a generous bonus.

In due time Captain Hardy and his accomplices were tried. Alec had to appear as a witness against them, but he found that he had the moral support of every honest shipper at Bivalve. And this time,

true to prediction, Hardy did go to prison, and every one of his pals went with him. Their assault on Alec, and their evident intent to kill him, had as much to do with their getting a prison sentence as the actual theft of oysters did. So it came about that Alec was relieved of the danger of personal injury.

Slowly the winter passed. Daily Alec's admiration for the shipper grew. Now that he was helping with the books, Alec understood how very hard hit the shipper was. He thought he understood the very sober face and the worried look the captain carried. But never a word escaped the captain's lips that would lead any one to think he was in difficulty, and even Alec never guessed the actual truth.

Spring came. This time it was a warm, balmy spring. Earth and water and air warmed up early and stayed warm. If only the oystermen had known it, this was the season of all seasons to put down shells. But the oystermen were in poor condition to do much of anything. There was hardly a man among them who had not lost money. More than one of these almost lost his faith with his money. In consequence, grounds were shelled lighter than they had been in years.

But Alec had not lost his faith nor his determination. Everything that he saw and read and heard tended to increase his belief that scientific oystering would pay as the old rule-of-thumb style of oystering had never paid. And the more he

became convinced of that fact, the readier he was to back his judgment with his cash, to bet more and more heavily on himself. To him that hath, the Good Book tells us, shall be given. Alec found it was even so. He had the knowledge. He had the oyster-bed. He had the shells. And with many boats idle, he had ships aplenty at his command. All that he had he risked on the shelling of his beds. He put down bushels where other planters ordinarily planted baskets. And he piled his shells in windrows transversely to the current. Shells by the ton he planted in his bed, stopping only when his money was entirely exhausted. When finally he had to end his efforts, he found that he had shelled his grounds almost to the last rod.

But it had required more courage to do so than Alec had foreseen. He had full confidence in his own judgment, and he had the support of Hawley, but Captain Rumford had stormed and stormed at what he termed Alec's folly. For the shipper had Alec's welfare very much at heart, and to him there seemed very little difference between dumping dollars and dumping shells into that great depth of water. In his own mind he was perfectly certain that Alec had parted with every one of his hard earned dollars that had gone into the shelling of the new bed.

But despite the shipper's opposition, Alec had persevered. Summer found him with an empty pocket, but full of hope. And it found him well to-

ward his twenty-first birthday. But what a different lad he was from the high school boy who had landed at Bivalve only a little less than two years previously. Hard physical labor had broadened and built him up. He was close to the six feet Captain Bagley had predicted for him. He was as powerful as an ox. His courage had grown. His mind had expanded with his body. His determination to climb up had become stronger and stronger. The friendship between Elsa and himself was as solid as a rock. It was founded on mutual respect and confidence. Trust was its cornerstone.

Nor was Elsa the only one who trusted Alec, nor yet the shipper and Alec's immediate friends. Everybody at the oyster wharves had confidence in him. They knew his ambitions. They also knew he would achieve them. Many a man among them would have risked his money on Alec as confidently as Alec had done himself and would have done so gladly. For all money and wealth in the world is won through the efforts of human beings. And far-seeing business men are ever looking for dependable lads to invest in, just as much as they are on the watch for other good bargains to buy. But of all this Alec as yet had little realization. All he understood was that he was keeping faith with himself and other men and that he was slowly but surely forging ahead.

CHAPTER XXV

THE CRISIS

DURING the two years that followed, matters went from bad to worse for the shipper. Even as Captain Hawley had predicted, the dearth of oysters continued. Day after day the fleet came back from the oyster grounds with the lightest of loads. But expenses were as heavy as ever. Gloomy, indeed, were these days at Bivalve. Credit was strained to the utmost. Ship-chandlers, merchants, supply houses, and banks were carrying accounts long overdue, and lending still more money to men unable to pay what they already owed. The lenders' only hope of getting out what they had already put into the oyster business lay in putting in still more, in carrying the shippers until the oyster business became prosperous again. Yet there was a limit even here, and now one, and then another shipper went to the wall.

Though nobody guessed it, Captain Rumford was in worse shape than any other planter in the business. His loans were so widely scattered, however, that not even the bankers suspected his actual condition. Bravely he fought to stave off a smash. Finally he came to the point where he had to sacrifice something or lose all. He sold a large oyster-

bed. Three years previously it would have brought him double the price he now got for it. But now the oyster business was in the worst sort of a depression. Nobody wanted oyster-beds at any price. Shippers could not work what they already had. So for a time the captain's offer went begging. Then finally some one who had money picked up the bargain.

Alec alone of the shipper's forces saw the oyster ground change hands without sorrow. It was one of the beds that Alec had condemned. He believed the shipper had benefited rather than harmed himself by the sale. In his opinion Captain Rumford would have been wise to sell his poor beds and work his good beds more intensively. He tried to tell the shipper something of this, but it was cold comfort to the captain.

Weeks passed. Things grew steadily worse in the oyster business. Yet there were exceptions to the general rule. More than one shipper was making money. Anybody who had oysters would have made money, for as oysters became scarcer the price rose higher. And some shippers had them. Day after day their boats came in well laden. Day after day their slips were occupied by well filled oyster scows, their piers encumbered with long rows of bulging oyster sacks waiting to be trundled aboard the trains. With his eyes open to all that was doing, Alec noted who these fortunate shippers were. He was much about the piers now, for sometimes for days on end the shipper kept him in the office

to look after things, while the shipper himself was absent on business. Daily Alec made it a point to note who was shipping oysters in quantity. Now he dropped a casual question here, now a joking inquiry there, until he amassed an amount of information that was amazing. For he was finding out far more than the mere matter of what planters had oysters. He was ascertaining where each man's oysters came from, and whether they were principally planted oysters or oysters that had set themselves in the various beds. Alec even tabulated the information he got, and when his table was complete, he examined his charts of the oyster-beds in the light of it.

He now possessed the most complete data about the oyster grounds that any one had probably ever collected. For his chart showed him, not only the contour of the Bay and the location and ownership of the various oyster-beds, but to a large extent the contour of the bottom of the Bay, the depth of water at different points, the nature of the bottom, whether muddy or sandy, while every principal slick and swirl and eddy was plainly indicated. Now, as he studied these data, he wanted to shout for very joy; for again and again he found proof of his own beliefs about oysters, and confirmation of the facts he had gotten from his little book. Here were planters with beds located much like the deep water beds of Captain Rumford, who were getting next to nothing. Here were others, with beds bordering a slick, like Captain Hardy's, who were

bringing in good catches of oysters, while still others whose grounds lay in some great eddy, like Captain Rumford's inshore beds, were coining money through their good hauls. Only where heavy plantings had been made were there good crops in those areas that Alec considered poor locations. Here was confirmation, indeed, here was proof, in very truth, of the convictions that had formed in Alec's mind. He believed that the truth about oyster grounds could be learned by any one who would study diligently, as he had, and with an open mind. For Alec never doubted that to him the truth was now an open secret.

All that he learned only convinced him the more that Captain Rumford's enforced sale of his deep water beds was not the calamity the shipper considered it. So he felt little distress when Captain Rumford was compelled to sacrifice still another of his deep water holdings. But he was frankly puzzled. He could not understand why this sale was necessary. Although he knew that the shipper was losing money steadily, he had a very fair idea as to the extent of these losses. To Alec it seemed as though the sale of the first bed should have enabled the captain to come through the season safely; for, though the bed had gone at a sacrifice, nevertheless, the sum actually received for it was large. That, with the money the captain did have, Alec thought, should have carried him through the season. Yet it was no time at all before the shipper was again in desperate straits. When the shipper

parted with still another of his holdings, Alec was dumfounded.

He went to Elsa with the matter. "Do you know," he asked, "why your father found it necessary to sell his third oyster ground?"

Elsa looked at him searchingly. Alec misunderstood the look. "I am not trying to pry into your father's affairs, Elsa," he said, "but you know ——"

"Of course you aren't, Alec," she replied. "Did you really think I believed you were? You ought to know me better by this time, Alec. I would never suspect you of doing anything dishonorable or discreditable. But your question startled me. I didn't even know that father had sold another oyster-bed. But I know he's deeply in trouble. Night after night I hear him talking to mother about things, though I don't know what they are saying, and mother looks so worried. And we have to be so careful about expenses, Alec. Father has always given me almost everything I asked for. Now he says he can't afford to spend a cent that he doesn't just have to. I don't know what it all means, but I know he's in trouble."

"Well, Elsa, you know I help keep his books, and I can't help knowing something about his business. He lost money last year and he's losing money this year. But the loss isn't so terrible that it should cause all this distress. At least I don't see how it can be. Yet your father is terribly worried. I can see it in a thousand ways. And he

has sold three oyster grounds now, and yet seems as hard pressed for money as ever. You do know that I don't want to pry into his business, Elsa, but I'd like to know more about it in a perfectly honest, friendly way. Likely there isn't a thing in the world I can do to help him. But if there is, I want to do it. That's why I'm asking you the present question."

"Thank you, Alec," said Elsa. "That is very fine of you. I know you mean every word of it. And I know it would give you pleasure to help father. But I am as much puzzled as you are. And what you say worries me. Come to me tomorrow night, and, meantime, I will see if I can learn what is the matter."

A very sober-faced Elsa it was who greeted Alec on the next night. "Come," she said. "Let us take a walk. I have lots to tell you, but I cannot tell it here."

They left the house and walked in the moonlight along the cool country road. On his arm Alec could feel Elsa's hand tremble. "Oh, Alec!" she almost sobbed, when they had walked a little distance. "It's terrible, just terrible. Father thinks he's going to lose everything he has—his oyster grounds, his boats, all his stocks and bonds and money, and even our very home. He says he doesn't know what is to become of us. He's too old to make another fortune and we may have to go to the poorhouse." She broke down and stopped in a flood of tears.

“Elsa, Elsa—dear,” said Alec, “don’t cry. Surely it cannot be so bad as that. I cannot see how his indebtedness can be so great. He isn’t losing so terribly much.”

She laid her head on his breast and Alec passed his arm protectingly around her shoulders. “It isn’t the oyster business at all, Alec. He has some other debts we never even suspected. I asked him what was the trouble and he told me everything. He said it would come easier if I could prepare myself for the crash.”

“But tell me about it, Elsa. What are these debts? Has your father been speculating?”

“No, Alec. But he has made large investments on the partial payment plan. If the oyster business had kept up the way it was going for two or three years, he could have met his obligations nicely and canceled his indebtedness. Now he not only has no revenue from his oysters to meet the payments, but he is getting in debt deeper every day he runs his boats.”

“Why doesn’t he stop running them?”

“Oh! He can’t, Alec, he can’t. He doesn’t dare let anybody know the situation, for nobody suspects it yet.”

“But surely the banks will help him out. Why, if he has an equity in a valuable property, even if it isn’t fully paid for, the banks will gladly lend him money.”

“Oh, Alec! That’s just where the trouble is. He’s borrowed every cent that anybody will lend

him. He's tried and tried, and he can't borrow another penny."

"But surely he can't be so desperately off as you think, Elsa."

"I'm afraid it's worse than I think. Mother has been crying all day. Father said flatly that he didn't think there was a particle of hope. He'll hang on as long as he can, in the hope that something may save him. By selling more oyster-beds and his boats, he says he can keep his head above water for a little while, but if he sells his grounds and his boats, how is he ever to pay the debts he owes? Oh, Alec! It's terrible!"

"Little girl," said Alec, "if I were to tell you that what you have just told me makes me almost happy, I suppose you'd never speak to me again."

"Oh, Alec!" cried Elsa springing away from him. "Whatever do you mean? You can't mean what you say."

"No, Elsa. I don't. I am distressed beyond measure about your father. But if your father is in such bad condition financially, you wouldn't call him rich any longer, would you?"

"Rich! Why, Alec, we'll soon be paupers. That's the very word father used."

"Then if you are a pauper, Elsa, you wouldn't think me a fortune-hunter if I asked you a question that's been in my heart for months, would you?"

"I—I—I don't know," faltered Elsa. "How can I know when you haven't even asked me?" But her tone showed very plainly that she knew.

"Are you sure you want me to ask you?" said Alec, raising her face with his hand and looking straight into her eyes. "I'll wait—if you wish it."

"Please—ask me," she said.

Alec bent his head and whispered in her ear.

"Are you asking because you really don't know, or just because you want to hear me say yes?" asked Elsa, archly.

"How could I know, when you haven't told me?" retorted Alec. "And anyway, I *do* want to hear you say yes."

"Then I'll say it. Yes."

"Thank you, Elsa," said Alec, pressing her hand. "Now that I know, I shall not bother you any more. What I must do, what we all must do, is to try to save your father."

"Oh! If only he could get oysters, he'd pull through sound enough. I'm sure of it. Prices were never higher. The shippers that have them are coining money. If only father's beds would yield as they sometimes do, he could meet all his interest charges and gradually pay off his debts."

"Then there's just one thing for me to do—find those oysters for him."

CHAPTER XXVI

VICTORY

FAR into the night Alec lay awake, turning the situation over and over in his mind. Where could he find the oysters for Captain Rumford? Find them he must. Never could he see his friend and benefactor, the man who had given him a start and who was helping him up the ladder—never could he see him go to the wall if by any possibility he could prevent it. And now, if he could only find the oysters, he could prevent it. But where could he find the oysters? Where could they be had at a reasonable figure?

He got up and lighted the lamp. Then he got his charts. Carefully he examined his notes. He had marked down every bed in the Cove that was producing well. One by one he examined the beds he had listed. Not one of them offered the slightest solution to his problem. The men who owned them were working them to capacity. He could hope for no help there. Again and again he went over his list, only to become more and more certain that no oysters were to be had.

In despair he turned to his chart itself. Bed after bed he examined, still without success. Then he came to Hardy's bed. Why hadn't he thought of it before, he asked himself. There must be

oysters there. If what he had read about oysters was true, there *must* be oysters in Hardy's bed. There must be quantities of them. Hardy had had plenty of shells down. Alec knew about the shells. He didn't know whether Hardy had planted many oysters or not. But if the shells were there, even if Hardy hadn't planted any seed, the bed must be loaded with oysters, Alec felt sure. Alec had examined the water in the bed. He knew it was swarming with spat. There *must* be oysters there. For the bed had lain untouched since Hardy went to prison. During the hard times that had come upon the oyster business these few years, almost nobody had bought oyster-beds or wanted to buy any. And when they did buy, they wanted to secure grounds from shippers known as careful oystermen, men like Captain Rumford, who took care of their grounds and worked them; not men like Captain Hardy, who was known to be reckless and careless, and who never took care of his beds. So there they had lain, untouched through all these months. There Alec could find oysters. There he *must* find them. For if he could not get them there, he could not get them at all. It was Hardy's bed or nothing.

Now he got out his bank-book and counted to the last cent the money he had on deposit, in his clothes, and owing him. Then he got his shell records. His shell boy kept track of the number of bushels he gathered from day to day, and each week Alec posted the record in his shell book. So he knew

almost to a basket what he had. The season was well along, his pile of shells was large, though not so huge as it would have been in a good year. But it was large enough. The shells in it were worth hundreds of dollars.

Next day, his shell book in his hand, Alec went to the bank where the captain had his account. He was well known there. He often made deposits for the shipper, or drew the pay-roll for him. He was listened to attentively. He wanted the bank to lend him a sum equal to the present value of the shells. The bank could have the shell pile as security. The pile would grow larger day by day.

"What do you want of the money?" the cashier asked him.

"I know where there is an unworked oyster-bed that I believe has oysters in it. I want to lease it and work it."

"Suppose there are no oysters in it. What then?"

"But there are."

"How do you know? Have you been dredging in it?"

"No, sir; but I know. I've been studying the waters of the oyster grounds for three years. I know every bed in the Cove. I know every slick and swirl and eddy. I know where the oyster larvæ are thick and where they are few. I know where you will get rich yields of oysters by shelling and where you will get hardly any. And I know there are oysters in this bed."

"See here, young man," said the banker, "I don't understand all this. Nobody else ever talked to me this way about oysters and oyster-beds before. And I've been dealing with oystermen all my life. Are you trying to stuff me?"

"Of course you never heard anything like it," said Alec, "for nobody ever did these things at Bivalve before. I am the first oysterman here of the new type. There will be scientific oystermen aplenty in a little while."

"I want to know more about this. Just come back into the directors' room and tell me more about it."

Half an hour later Alec walked out of the directors' room, his face shining. He signed a note and shoved it through the window to the cashier.

"That's all right, Mr. Cunningham," said the cashier. "I'll put this sum to your credit. And remember, if you need more we shall be glad to help you out."

Alec thanked the banker and walked hastily out. "Now who'd have thought that the mere story of what I've been doing would make him lend me the money?" he said to himself. What Alec did not understand was that it was his own character and not his story of scientific oyster methods that got him the money. Like Captain Rumford and other men, the banker, too, had been watching Alec through the years.

Straight to a lawyer Alec now hurried, with instructions to lease Hardy's oyster grounds. "Lease

them on a royalty basis, if you can, at so much per bushel," said Alec. "If you can't get them that way, pay a flat sum. I can give you so much now in cash, and the remainder from month to month as we dredge the oysters."

In a few days the lease was secured. Hardy wanted a lump sum. Alec signed the agreement and drew his check for all he had in the bank. "Now," he said to himself, "everything I've got in the world is at stake. I've backed my judgment to the limit. If I lose, I'll have to go in debt to pay what I still owe Hardy. If I win, the shipper is saved."

From the lawyer's office Alec went to the shipper's home. He found Elsa, as he had hoped he would, and told her what he had done.

"Oh, Alec!" she said. "I can't begin to tell you how fine you have been. If only you do get the oysters—won't it be wonderful!"

He sought out the shipper. "Captain Rumford," he said, "I wish you would lend me the *Bertha B* for a day."

The shipper looked at him in astonishment. "What do you want of the *Bertha B*?" he asked curiously.

"I've leased Hardy's oyster-beds," said Alec quietly. "I borrowed the worth of my shell pile and added all my savings to that and paid it down on a lease, and I still owe money on it. I want to see if there are any oysters in the bed."

Captain Rumford looked at his assistant as

though the latter had suddenly gone crazy. "You're joking," he said.

"I'm telling the simple truth," replied Alec. "I very much want to know whether there are any oysters in that bed. Wouldn't you, if you had leased it?"

"Alec! Alec!" cried the shipper sternly. "Have you lost every bit of sense you ever had? You won't get a dollar's worth of oysters out of that bed. I've told you time and again those deep water beds are no place for oysters."

"You have, indeed, Captain Rumford," said Alec. "I know exactly what you think of them. What I want to know now is whether you'll lend me the *Bertha B* for a day."

"You might as well know the truth first as last," said the shipper. "There is nothing so terrible as suspense. Take the boat and welcome." And the shipper turned away with his face so haggard that it made Alec's heart ache.

Twenty-four hours later the *Bertha B* came plowing up to her pier. Alec leaped ashore and ran to the shipper's office. "Captain Rumford!" he called, his eyes shining, his voice vibrant with emotion, "Will you please come out on the pier?"

The captain came slowly down the stairs. In looks he had aged ten years. His face was drawn and haggard. His brow was deeply furrowed. Dark circles were about his eyes. His step was uncertain, almost shambling. His shoulders were stooped. Alec was shocked when he looked at him.

"What is it?" asked the shipper in a dull, lifeless tone.

"Please come look at the *Bertha B*. I just wanted you to see her before we go to the float."

The shipper followed Alec down the pier. Half-way he stopped dead in his tracks, paralyzed with astonishment. The *Bertha B* sat so low in the water her decks were almost awash. Her cabin, her hatches, her deck, her forepeak, all were covered with oysters. The boat was fairly swamped with them.

"Oysters!" gasped the astonished shipper. "How many have you? Where did you get them? What are you going to do with them?"

"There's more than a thousand dollars' worth," said Alec. "We are going to put them on your big float up the river."

"But where did you get them?"

"In the bed I just leased—Tom Hardy's bed. Come into the office and I'll tell you all about it. I don't want to do it here."

Alec waved his hand to Skipper Hawley, then took the shipper by the arm and led him up to his office.

"Captain Rumford," he said, "there are oysters and oysters and oysters out there. I can bring you in a thousand dollars' worth a day. While we were at it, we just looked at my grounds and they're simply covered with oysters, too. There are tons and tons of them in my beds. They are a little too small to dredge yet, but they'll be all right next fall.

And your own shallow beds will be ready to dredge then, too."

The shipper fairly gasped. "You got those oysters out in that deep water?" he said. Then he asked, "What are you going to do with them now that you have them?"

"That's just what I want to talk about, Captain," said Alec. "I've got the oysters. You've got the boats. If we could just make some sort of agreement—if we could somehow combine forces—why, Captain, if you'll just go ahead and dredge oysters for yourself until you get on your feet again, and then dredge a few for me ——" Alec stopped, embarrassed. He did not know how to say what he wanted to say, now that the time had come to say it.

The shipper looked at him with the old piercing glance that had seemed to bore through Alec so long ago. "Boy," he said, "what are you trying to do—give me those oysters after the way you've toiled and studied and saved to get them?"

"Oh! Captain, if you'll only take them," said Alec, "I'll be the happiest fellow in the world. They are yours—every one you need, even if you need them all."

"God bless you, lad," cried the shipper, blowing his nose violently, and beginning to pace the floor. "How I would like to take them. Why, they'd save me, lad. They'd save me."

"Then take them. That's why I got them, Captain Rumford,—to save you,"

The captain turned and faced his assistant. "I will take them," he said. "I will take them. But I'll take them on one condition. I take them as your partner." He hesitated a moment. His face paled a bit. "Maybe you wouldn't want a broken-down old man as a partner," he said, "an old man already behind the times."

"Captain Rumford," said Alec, "you are jesting. Surely you don't mean that you want me as your partner in business. Why, I have no money now, and I have nothing, sir, but a little oyster-bed to put up against your great oyster grounds and your boats. It's a wonderful opportunity, sir, but it wouldn't be fair to you to take it."

"Humph!" said the shipper. "Not fair, when I shall owe to you everything I have in the world. I am the one who is penniless; for without these oysters you offer I am a pauper. Now will you become my partner?"

"Oh, Captain!" said Alec. "Of course I will, but I never dreamed of such a thing."

"Likely not," said the captain. "But I have known for a long time that it was coming."

"What!" gasped Alec.

"Certainly," said the shipper. "I rather suspected it the first time I set eyes on you. I knew it the night you went overboard after Hawley."

"What do you mean?" asked Alec. "I don't understand it at all, sir."

"It's plain enough, lad. A man of my age can't carry on a business forever. I've needed somebody

to help me for a long time back and I've been looking for some one, too. Yet I never could find just the man I wanted as a partner. But when I found how clean and true and fine you were, young man, and when I came to know you well enough to understand that I could trust you as I can my own wife, my mind was made up. What do you think I've had you in the office for, anyway? What do you think I've put my business more and more in your hands for? Didn't you ever suspect that I was training you up to carry on the work when I couldn't do it any longer?"

"Captain!" gasped Alec. "I can hardly believe it. To think of my being an oyster shipper—now—when I was only this morning a deck-hand. It just doesn't seem possible."

"Are you sure that you're satisfied with the bargain? Don't you want to draw out before it's too late?"

An idea came to Alec and he stepped quickly toward the shipper. "There is one thing more I'd like," he said, "something I want more than anything else in the world."

The shipper looked at him uncertainly, questioningly, as though displeased. "Name it," he said brusquely.

"Your daughter, sir."

"God bless me!" said the shipper. "You want a lot."

"Hadn't you foreseen that, too?" asked Alec, smiling.

“ I wouldn’t be truthful if I said no,” said the shipper.

“ Your answer? ” said Alec.

“ *My* answer? ” said the shipper. “ What about the girl? Don’t you think it would be a good thing to ask her? ”

“ I have,” said Alec, blushing. “ She’s like that man I told you of once.”

“ That man? ” said the shipper, puzzled. “ What man? What was his name? ”

“ Barkis,” said Alec.

The shipper laughed and held out his hand. “ Take her, son,” he said. “ You deserve her. And take an old man’s blessing. You have saved a gray head from disgrace. Now God bless you.”

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